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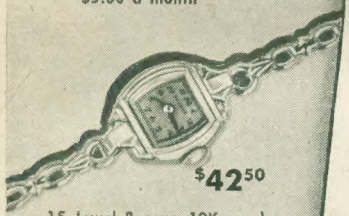

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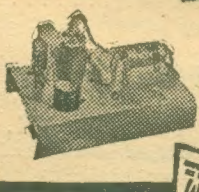

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10 FICTION BULL'S EYES IN EVERY ISSUE

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 10TH

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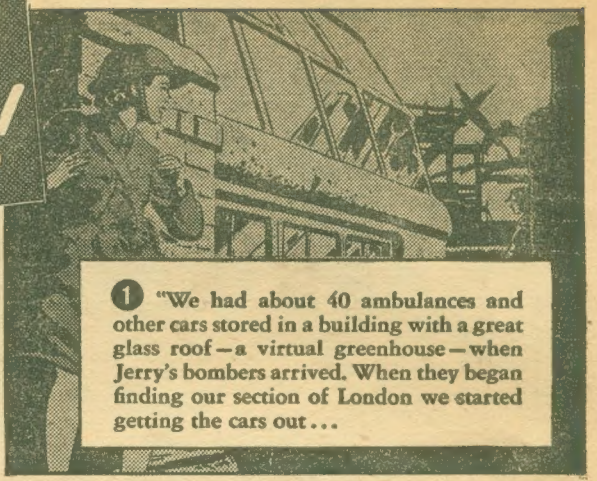
THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

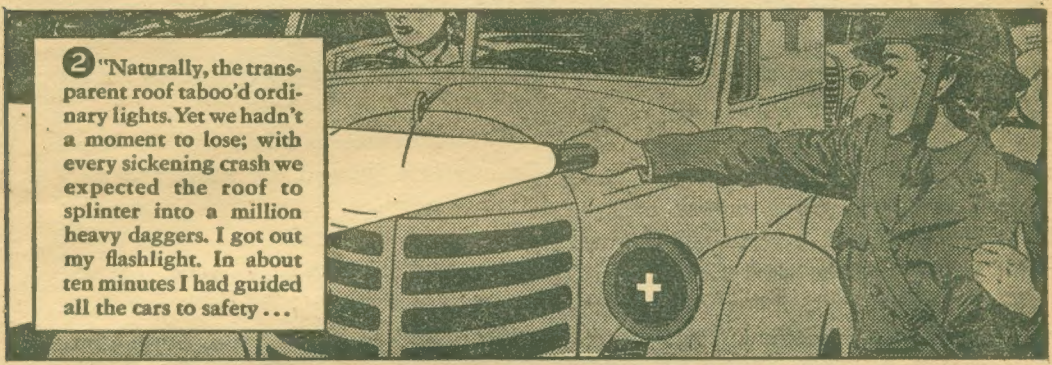
Published monthly by Popular Publications, 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter Sept. 24, 1941, at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1943, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.20. Foreign postage 75c additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Ferry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

BLITZED IN A GREENHOUSE!

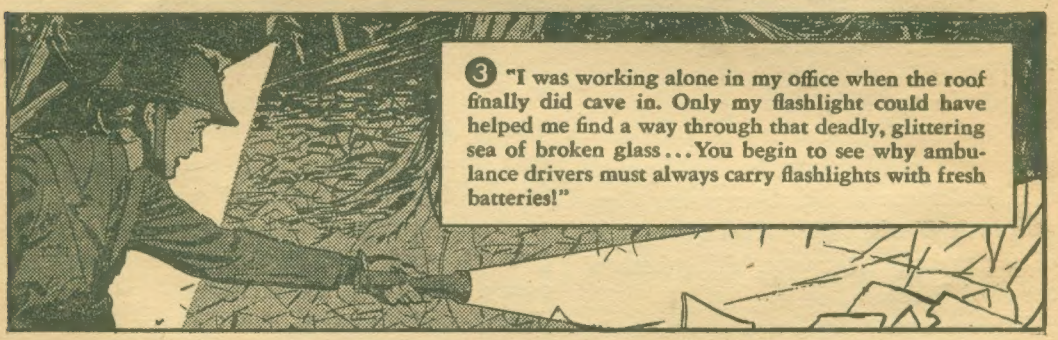
(The exciting experience of Margaret Bridges, of the London Auxiliary Ambulance service, during one of London's heaviest raids. Pretty, attractive 30-year-old Miss Bridges is part English, part American. She volunteered for the ambulance service, reporting for duty just three days before war was declared.)



1 "We had about 40 ambulances and other cars stored in a building with a great glass roof—a virtual greenhouse—when Jerry's bombers arrived. When they began finding our section of London we started getting the cars out...



2 "Naturally, the transparent roof taboo'd ordinary lights. Yet we hadn't a moment to lose; with every sickening crash we expected the roof to splinter into a million heavy daggers. I got out my flashlight. In about ten minutes I had guided all the cars to safety...



3 "I was working alone in my office when the roof finally did cave in. Only my flashlight could have helped me find a way through that deadly, glittering sea of broken glass... You begin to see why ambulance drivers must always carry flashlights with fresh batteries!"

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ALONG THE STEEL TRAIL

There's vivid color and robust drama in the tales of those pioneer railroad towns that sprang up over night and disappeared as magically in a billow of smoke from a snorting iron horse.

And there's a human side to the strong-muscled men who blazed those steel trails from ocean to ocean. Those men needed meat every day to keep them going—two full pounds of red meat.

This red meat—which is as scarce to us now as it was to those railroad builders—is the prized treasure of the battling factions in Harry F. Olmsted's next feature novel. He very appropriately calls it, "War on the Steel Trail."

Young Greg McClennon, son of the hard-bitten boss of the Prairie Construction Company, had to get meat to his father's workers. Over outlaw-infested trails he brought it—so that the Prairie outfit could beat the rival Carns' gang.

Yet at every step, young McClennon was balked by a mysterious driving force that pulled every crooked trick known to those tough, rawhide-and-steel railroad men.

And the unerring accuracy and timing of these murderous blows brought suspicion and mistrust into the very heart of the McClennon outfit. For young Greg was in love with Kitty Carns, daughter of the notorious, gunman-hiring boss of the rival bunch.

The romance of these two young people, set against a backdrop of violence and bloodshed, is one of the highlights of this tale of misplaced trust and blindly encouraged treachery.

And here, in Harry Olmsted's own words, is the dramatic scene where Greg, trying to be fair and honest, leads his men into Carns' town—in defiance of threats of wholesale slaughter. . . .

It was eleven thirty when the McClennon train rolled slowly, cautiously into the environs of Mescalero. Sunlight laid its hard yellow glare along Front Street, casting almost no shadows where facts could be hidden—and the men and guns of deceit and treachery. The situation was as crystal as glass, and even Greg was surprised. No wall of men lined up to resist their entry. No shot rang out its challenge to battle. Yet the town was filled with Carns men and they lined the north side of the street, their ranks thinning the farther they got from the Palace Saloon. And there was a sullen tenseness about them that spoke eloquently of their inner feelings.

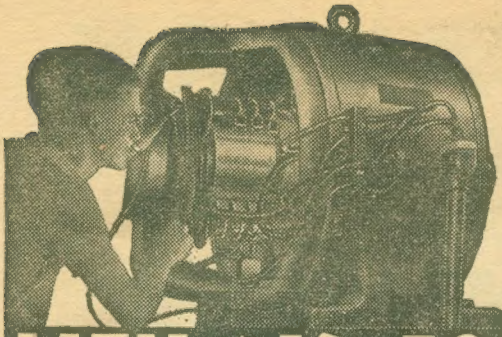
The train came to a halt and the McClennon men jumped off, silent and determined now that the test was imminent. They stood there, looking at Greg as good soldiers ever look to their leader before the shock of battle.

"Slow and easy and calm, boys," he counseled, in a voice that traveled a long way in the unwonted silence. "Hold to the south side of the street. No drinking. No fool lip challenging. Keep your mouths shut and your eyes and ears open. Just line the street and stand by till I thrash out a few points. If one of you shoots before they start it, or before I give the word, I'll kill that one without mercy. All right, men—take your places. . . ."

* * *

In the next issue Harry F. Olmsted will tell the complete, sensational story of these railroaders. And there will be nine other novelettes and short stories by the leading Western writers. December 10 STORY WESTERN will be published November 10th.

The Editor.



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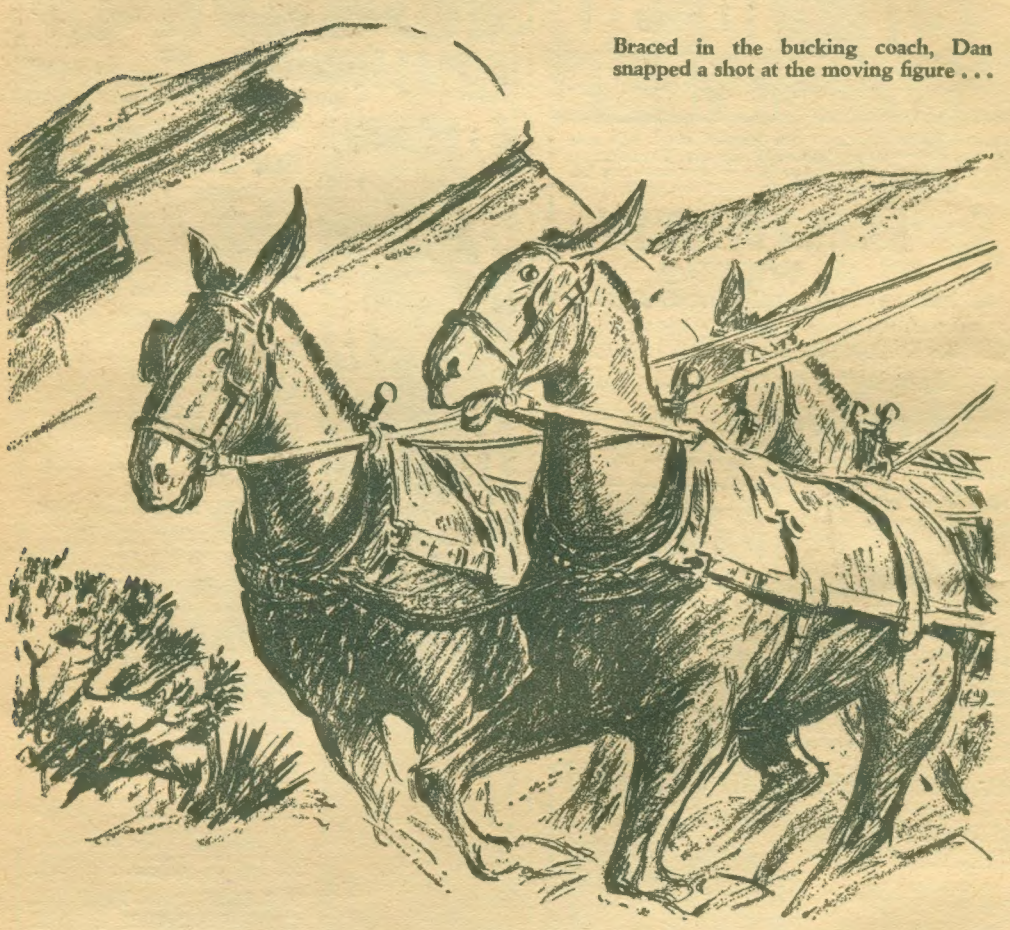
CITY STATE

★ ★ ★ TAVERN

A Swift, Dramatic Novel of Frontier Los Angeles

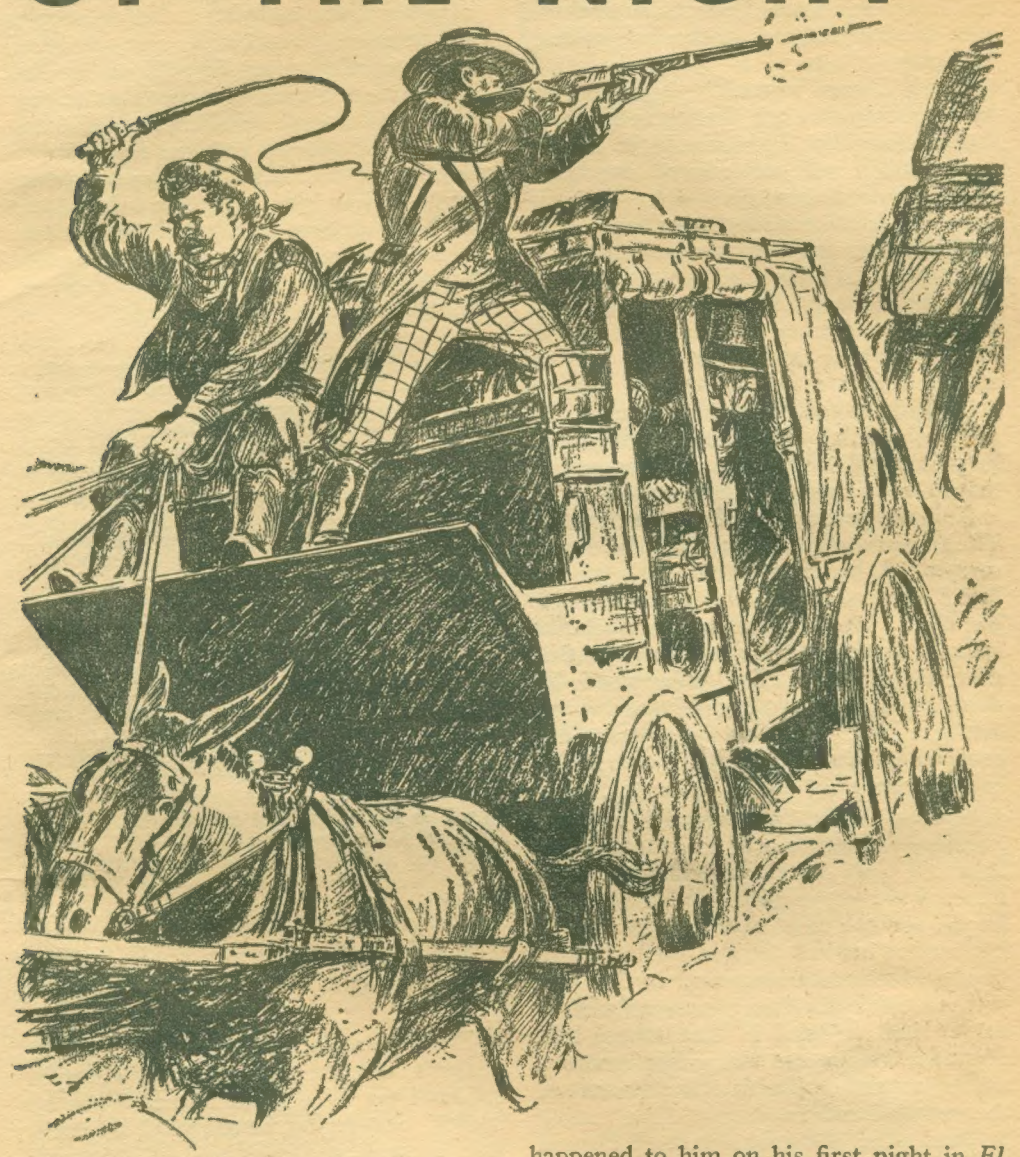
By M. HOWARD LANE



Braced in the bucking coach, Dan snapped a shot at the moving figure . . .

A raw tenderfoot fresh from Boston, Daniel Payne inherited the notorious Tavern of the Night . . . hangout of owlhooters and border riff-raff. But when Dan arrived to claim his inheritance he found his path blocked by buscadero guns—and a smooth-talking gent who claimed that he *was the real Daniel Payne!*

OF THE NIGHT



CHAPTER ONE

Gold for a Greenhorn

BRIGHT morning sunlight roused young Daniel Payne, but for the space of at least two minutes he knew better than to open his eyes. With a head that felt like his, and a tongue that tasted like a strip of raw bullhide, Dan Payne could guess just about what had happened to him on his first night in *El Pueblo de los Angeles.*

And then the distinct memory came to him that he had taken exactly one drink in the Bella Union bar the night before! It was a fact that jarred his eye-lids apart—and what young Daniel Payne, late of Boston, saw was enough to make any self-respecting man groan. His long body was stretched full length in the refuse-laden gutter in front of the entrance to the Bella Union Hotel. Early morning pedestrians

were regarding him with callous sympathy. Evidently he wasn't the first drunk they'd seen in a Los Angeles gutter, Dan realized ironically.

"Only I wasn't drunk!" That one fact kept pushing through the fog in his head.

Automatically, Dan started to smooth his wrinkled buff coat. Something heavy and lumpy rested in one pocket. With fingers that felt like sticks, he pulled a small buckskin bag from his pocket. It was a poke such as these Californians used to carry their money, Dan saw, and it hadn't been in his pocket the night before. A little shakily he untied the thong holding it closed, and a generous fistful of fifty dollar gold pieces fell into his palm.

"That drink," Dan muttered to no one in particular, "sure had power. But at that I'd rather see gold than snakes!"

And the gold was real. He counted it. The sum amounted to *more* than he'd been carrying in his money-belt. "It's got me beat," Dan muttered, and reached inside his shirt. He felt his fingers touch the smooth flatness of his middle, and that was all. Someone had unbuttoned his shirt, and carefully removed the money-belt beneath it. And that same person had dropped a poke of gold into his coat pocket in exchange.

With eyes that still refused to focus completely, Dan glanced down at his left hand. A gold band ring, crudely hammered from virgin gold, circled his third finger, and the sight of it brought ragged laughter to his lips. It was the last shred of identification he possessed in this new land of California, for papers as well as money had reposed in that money-belt. Identification papers that might prove a whole lot more valuable than the money the belt had contained.

"And why?" Dan asked himself, "would anybody want Daniel Payne's birth record and college diploma?"

There seemed to be just one answer to that. Some Californian hoped to pass himself off as Daniel Payne, here in Los Angeles or in San Bernardino. At thought of the second town memory came flooding back to Dan. The letter inviting him to head West by the first Pacific Mail packet on which he could get accommodations had reached Boston close to sixty days earlier, and had brought back many memories of his irascible old uncle, Nugget Sam Payne.

Boston town, at least its better people, had breathed a collective sigh of relief when the echoing cry of gold in '49 had made Samuel Payne announce that he was going West to grab his share of dust, drink his share of red-eye, and kiss his share of the prettiest gals. Dan had almost skipped college to join him, being the only Payne who had ever liked bellicose Uncle Samuel.

And that was how the letter had started, Dan remembered, sitting dazedly there in the gutter.

> "Danny boy," Nugget Sam Payne had written, "you're the only cuss in the whole family who ever had a hoot of use for me, so I'm askin' you to head West by the next mail packet that will drop you at San Pedro. I'm located in San Bernardino, a hell-for-breakfast town that ought to suit you same as it does me.
>
> "I never made my pile along the Sacramento, but I scratched enough dinero together to come here to southern California when the placers started to peter out up north. San Berdoo is the cross-roads of a new empire, and I got me a saloon sitting right slap dab where I can collect comin' and going. *El Taverna del Noche*, it's called. Right appropriate, seein' as most of my customers ain't fond of daylight.
>
> "Reason I want you out here is because the San Berdoo sawbones says I got a ticker that's apt to quit any dang day. My will is made and filed already, and you're named heir. Howsomever, I'd shore like to see you and teach you the hang of southern Californy before I go over the hill for good.
>
> "Bring stuff along to identify yourself, on account of lawyers are suspicious cusses. Yuh see it ain't likely, but I might be gone afore you git here."

There'd been more to the letter, but Dan couldn't remember it right now. He tried to stand up. The plaza heaved when he moved. Staggering, he caught at the curb-side hitchrail, and hung on. A bitter taste came into his mouth, and it was the answer, he realized weakly, to the way he felt.

Another memory came back to him. The station agent had told him he'd have to wait overnight for a stage to San Bernardino. The man had suggested that he put up for the night at the Bella Union.

Dan had done that, and after a Mexican dinner that had burned his Eastern palate like hell-fire and damnation he had moseyed into the saloon and gaming room

which was the Bella Union's chief attraction. The atmosphere had been convivial, and he had returned the friendly nod of a smooth-faced, mustached gentleman who was about the same build as himself, and only a few years older.

Trey Booth, the stranger had called himself, Dan remembered. The man had looked like a gentleman gambler, and he had accepted the Californian's invitation to come along and 'smile at the bar.' One drink, yes that had been all he'd taken. And the night was a blank from then until now.

The liquor had been fouled with some drug. The bitter taste in his mouth was proof of it. "Mebbe," Dan told himself disgustedly, "you'll get dry behind the ears someday. Whoever named this town the City of Fallen Angels had it about right!"

Experimentally, Dan stepped to the boardwalk. It rolled under him, but he found that if he rolled with it, he could walk in a zigzag course.

The tender behind the Bella Union bar this early morning hour saw the tall young fellow who came staggering through the door, and grinned sympathetically. By the cut of his clothes, he was a greenhorn, and by the look of them he'd had a hard night. About twenty-two, the young fellow was, he judged, and not bad looking for an Easterner. He poured a double Bourbon, and beckoned.

"Come and git, amigo," the barkeep grinned. "Bella Union service, its on the house. We alus wake up the guests with the h'ar of the dog that bit 'em!"

Dan weaved to the bar. He shuddered at sight of the whiskey, and then set his lips grimly. His stomach might say no, but his mind told him that the liquor might help clear the fog from his brain. And he had a hunch that he was going to need a clear head from now until he shook the hand of Nugget Sam Payne.

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HE GULPED the whiskey, and through stinging eyes regarded the barkeep. "You know a gent named Trey Booth?" he asked. The tender's eyebrows lifted. "I don't know nobody, amigo," he said reprovingly.

Dan nodded, accepting the rebuke. It came to him that he was beginning to learn some of the California ropes, his uncle had mentioned. Out here folks evidently didn't ask, or answer many questions, leastways when they concerned other individuals.

He shrugged, and the whiskey was already starting to warm him from head to foot. It had been just what he needed. There was almost a smile on Dan's face when he asked his next question. "The agent told me the next stage left for San Bernardino today. He didn't mention the time. Do you know?"

He watched the barkeep pull a big stem-winding watch from his shirt pocket. "In around thuty minutes, amigo," the tender said, "but it ain't no ride for a greenhorn even with that slug of whiskey in your guts. There's a Mex driver on this early run who ain't got no respect for man nor devil. He ain't happy less'n he's risking his neck and yours. Nobody rides with the cuss lessn' he has to. Pancho O'Toole, he calls hisself, and he's fat enough to pad his own carcass. But a long, lean cuss like you, why you'll find your tailbone up around your ears afore you hit San Berdoo!"

"O'Toole?" Dan grinned, and he was beginning to feel much better. "That sounds Irish to me. I'm one of them myself."

"There's a smidgin' of Mick in him," the barkeep admitted, "way back somewhere. That's what makes him such a big damn fool."

Dan was still grinning as he backed from the bar. "I guess I'm another one. I'll take a chance on him."

Five minutes later, the smile was gone from his lips. He had obtained his key from the morning clerk and gone out to his patio room to collect his luggage which consisted of only a single telescope bag, for Nugget Sam had mentioned in his letter that they would outfit him with proper duds once he reached San Bernardino.

"Your Boston fooforaw won't do out here," Nugget Sam had written. "We'll fix you up with somethin' sensible."

The words came back to Dan Payne with sardonic irony as he stared about the cubby-hole room he had been assigned. It was furnished with only a bed.

"Looks to me like somebody thinks Boston fobforaw might come in handy," Dan muttered slowly, "and if the cuss' name isn't Trey Booth, I'll go try some more of those knock-out drops!"

* * *

The stage agent's eyebrows lifted knowingly as Dan paid his fare to San Bernardino, and he realized that he couldn't blame the man much. He'd made himself as presentable as possible with soap and water and a comb, but nothing could smooth the wrinkles in his fawn-hued breeches and buff coat, or restore the freshness of his white shirt and rumpled cravat.

Even his walk was still a little unsteady as he turned to move out to the porch. He was almost to the door when a creaky voice from one shadowy corner of the waiting room stopped him in his tracks.

"Sir," the words came a little foggily to Dan, "I wish to inform you that my niece and I will not ride in the same coach with a drunken souse such as yourself. When the stage arrives you will kindly take your place on the box with the driver!"

"Uncle—" a girl's horrified voice started to protest.

Dan turned slowly, and peered at the dusky bench along the far wall. Two people were seated there. The man was a tall, gaunt old devil wearing magnificent burnsides that were snowy as his hair. He had a mouth like a trap, and long pointed chin. Dressed in rusty black, he leaned his weight on a heavy, gold-headed cane, and his eyes mirrored fierce antipathy to Payne's apparent drunkenness.

The girl, though, was a different proposition. She was just a little thing, not much bigger than a minute, he thought, and there was something about her that told Dan she was just as much of a greenhorn as himself. She managed to smile at him in a way that seemed to excuse her uncle's uncalled-for remarks. Inwardly, Dan cursed Trey Booth with pure Irish venom. That black-mustached gentleman was responsible for all of his troubles to date. He'd never be able to make friends with that girl now, for her uncle didn't look like the forgiving kind. Nothing, however, prevented him from returning her smile.

He swung his hazel eyes back to the old man. "California sure is a hospitable place," he drawled. "I'd already figured to ride with the driver, so you don't need to worry about getting contaminated."

"You're an insolent—" the old man started to shout, but the rattle of stage wheels out in front cut his remarks short.

"You'd better hustle," the agent said warningly. "Pancho, he don't like to waste time. Iffen he can't shave leastways one minute off the run to San Berdoo each trip he ain't happy."

Dan moved outside, and his legs still felt rocky. He was curious about this O'Toole. From what he'd already been told, Pancho was evidently quite some man. In his surmise he was not disappointed.

Pancho O'Toole sat the box of the old Army style stage with the aplomb of a conqueror. His heavy thighs strained at the seams of his sky-blue *calzonera* breeches, and the leather bolero jacket that covered his massive shoulders was completely inadequate when it came to spanning his chest. His shirt was red satin, and a small red *vicuma* hat set precariously atop the curly mass of his black hair. A vast, grinning man, with teeth the color of pearl studs, he looked down on his passengers.

"Con tumulto!" he yelled. "Hurry, amigos. *Dios,* and the time she waits for no man. I will be old and ready for my grave eef you do not move faster. You, gringo," Dan found the stager's twinkling black eye on him. "Come ride with me. Thees fresh morning air will do you good, no?"

Dan grinned. He had taken an instant liking to the stager. Pancho O'Toole was talkative, and San Bernardino was six hours away. A man might be able to learn a lot in that length of time.

Dan followed the girl and her uncle down to the stage. Her hair, beneath the demure bonnet she wore, was the color of golden grain, and her eyes were as blue as the California sky over them. When they were safe inside the curtained coach, he clambered over the front wheel, and into the seat alongside O'Toole. A rifle stood between them, and twin Navy cap-and-ball Colts snugged Pancho's thighs. Dan looked at the weapons and wondered if

he'd ever get his own back again. He'd had them in the telescope bag, wrapped in oiled silk.

Two mozos strained to hold back the plunging, squealing lead mules. O'Toole gathered the reins. He looked once at a big stem-winder dangling from a fob pinned to his shirt.

"Suelto carajo!" he howled at the stock tenders. "Let loose!"

The stage started with a rattle and jerk that flung Dan hard against the back-rest. He heard O'Toole's pleased chuckle. "Eet is good," he proclaimed, "to shake the eye-teeth from that old buzzard behind us. I feel sorry for the senorita, but before we reach San Berdoo, I promise you, amigo, that Hiram Loomis weel weesh he had waited for the next stage. And you—"

"Me," Dan howled above the thunder of hooves, and whistling wind, "I need it. Irishmen always ought to ride together." The mules had slowed to a trot on the first hill, and he could speak more normally. "Payne, is my name. Daniel Payne, from Boston."

If he had pushed a Colt into the giant stager's ribs, O'Toole's round brown face could have changed expression no more swiftly. Surprise sagged his full, wide lips for a moment, then he twisted with the agility of a cat to look full at the Bostoner.

"Mil diablos, and what ees this, amigo? How can Daniel Payne be on my stage when he has already been in that city of sinners, San Bernardino, for more than wan week?"

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DAN'S eyes widened. "Let me get this straight, Pancho," he began slowly. "You say Daniel Payne is already in San Berdoo?"

"Si," the breed bobbed his head emphatically. "Have I not seen him at *El Taverna del Noche?"*

"And is he about my size?" Dan asked grimly. "A little heavier, and a little older. Wearing a very handsome blond mustache, and with a pair of pale eyes that seem to bore right through a man?"

"Si, si," Pancho O'Toole nodded again. "That ees Daniel Payne from Boston."

"That," Dan corrected him grimly, "is a man named Trey Booth!"

Briefly he sketched their meeting the night before, and told of awakening in the gutter this morning with nothing to prove his identity save the crude gold ring on his left hand. "My uncle sent it to me from Sacramento," he finished. "Claimed it was hammered from the first nugget he found. He'll recognize it, but nobody else will, this side of Boston."

Pancho O'Toole's eyes were the same hue as his hair, and they could either laugh or become extremely thoughtful. "Eef you are the real Daniel Payne, senor, why did not this other one keel you instead of just leaving you lay in the gutter like the common drunk? And why in the name of the Good Mother, should he leave the gold in your pocket?"

Dan laughed shortly as the stage picked up speed again. "Pancho," he drawled, "those are just two of the questions I've been asking myself. Now you've given me another one. It's been a long time since Sam Payne has seen any of us, but he'd never mistake Trey Booth for me, unless he's gone blind."

"Blind, senor?" O'Toole's thick brows quirked. "Has no one told you that your oncle ees dead these two weeks?"

"Dead!" Shock that drove the last fog from his head hit Dan. "Sam's dead?"

"Of a surety, senor," O'Toole shrugged his powerful shoulders. *"Dios,* and it was a shame, too. He was kicked in the face by a *muy malo* mule. I myself rode with the procession that followed the hearse to boothill, for Sam he was my friend.

"Only the swamper of *El Taverna del Noche* who found him in the corral behind the tavern, and the undertaker saw him after the mule had finished hees job of killing."

Dan drew a deep breath of morning air. It was hard for him to realize that Nugget Sam Payne was dead. Killed before his appointed time, before they'd even had a chance to greet one another again.

"I'll want to see that swamper you mentioned," he muttered.

O'Toole shrugged, and a thin crease formed as his brows drew together. "That, too, may prove difficult, amigo. Old Moss Prentiss, he ees the swamper, seems to have vamoosed. He left the tavern after thees hombre you call Trey Booth come to San Bernardino weeth the story that he

ees Daniel Payne of Boston. Thees Booth, he take possession of the taverna pronto, and I for one theenk it will soon become wan hell for breakfast place.

"Your oncle was not what you call the angel. Hees Tavern of Night ees two miles outside of town, on the Trace to Arizona and the deserts where men search for the *oro*. The teamster, the prospector, the traveller, the outlaw, all rub the shoulders in the *Taverna del Noche*. Blood has been spilled there more than wance. Eet ees the place where men tell of the strikes they have made in the San Rafael mountains, and in the Panamints. A dark place, senor, outside the law, and mos' certainly no home for a young gringo from Boston!"

Dan chuckled mirthlessly. "Men's fists aren't any harder here than in the East. I've done my share of fighting, Pancho."

"Yes," O'Toole's gaze was critical. "You are long and lean, like the lobo wolf. But in thees country, men do not use their fists. The *pistola,* or the bright *cuchillo,* those are the popular weapons in that City of Sin, San Berdoo. And unless I am very wrong, thees Booth ees expert with both. He weel make the fortune out of your *Taverna del Noche,* for he weel not be honest like your oncle. He will get the prospectors drunk, and they will tell of what they have found, and then thees Booth will send men into the San Rafael's and Panamint's to jump their claims. Some may be good for nothing, but eet takes only wan beeg strike to bring a man much *oro.*"

Dan nodded slowly. He could see now why the Tavern of Night was a prize worth impersonation—or murder.

At the end of ten miles, hostlers came running from the first corral and waystation to hitch fresh mules into the traces. And by the time they were away again, Dan had one more question to ask the stager.

"If San Berdoo was willing to accept Booth as Sam's nephew on no sayso but his own, why did he go to the trouble to fix it up so he could meet and rob me?"

They were racketing over sage desert now, mules stretched into a hard run, and for a pair of miles Panch O'Toole had only time for the reins. But when they reached a low range of hills that lay ahead, the stager let the animals seek their own pace on the grade that wound upward, and turned a grinning, perspiring face toward his passenger after giving his stem-winder a glance.

"*Dios,* and we are beating my schedule so far by wan minute. I hope the senorita inside does not mind the rough riding. Eef it were not for her I would shake that Hiram Loomis like wan pea in a pod. He, senor," O'Toole sobered, "ees a Los Angeles lawyer. A devil needing only horns. His own brother, he would not trust. And that ees why thees Booth needs your papers, and clothes. For, look you, amigo, thees Loomis was your oncle's lawyer, and I am not what you call the reader of minds, but I theenk he ees on his way to San Berdoo right now to see what proof thees Booth can offer to prove his right to the Tavern of Night."

Young Daniel Payne groaned, and he had a picture of himself weaving across the stage station in Los Angeles. "And he thinks I'm a souse!" he muttered.

O'Toole shook his head sympathetically as they reached the summit of the hills and started the downward descent along a goat-track road that clung like a faint scar to the side of a steep, narrow canyon. O'Toole didn't seem to mind the road. He sent the mules racing down it, and his dark eyes studied his companion soberly.

"You are in *muy malo* trouble, amigo," he agreed. "*Dios,* and that devil in the coach has the heart of stone. You have nothing to prove the things you say. Thees Booth, he has everything. But still, even such a clever *renegado* might say or do the wrong theeng—"

Something crackled like tearing paper through the air past the Bostoner's head, and though it was the first time he had ever heard the sound of lead, Dan knew instinctively that a bullet had almost nudged him into eternity.

He was grabbing for the rifle between them before the sound of the shot came to them from the high canyon wall on their left. Smoke bloomed from a copse of boulders a hundred yards above them. Other puffs of it started rising now, and Dan heard the ugly thud of bullets ripping into the body of the coach. The tenderfoot girl was inside. The thought seared him like fire.

Pancho O'Toole had his bullwhip streaking forward. *"Carajo!"* he was yelling at the mules. *"Andale,* you sons of Satan!"

Braced in the bucking, swaying coach, Dan snapped one shot upward at the dot of a moving figure, but he knew that he had missed. A man couldn't shoot from the deck of a racing stage.

It was over then as quickly as it had started, for the running mules had plunged headlong around a hairpin bend. Dan felt the stage careen dangerously toward the lip of the road, and only his quick grab for the hand-rail held him in the box. Rocks and gravel spattered over the rim on their right. A wheel slipped then caught again as Pancho seemed to lift the straining mules right out of their traces with whip and voice.

Dan grabbed the stager's arm. Blood was welling from the lobe of O'Toole's left ear where ricocheting lead had scratched him, but otherwise neither of them were injured.

"The girl," he yelled. "Loomis. Those shots were directed at them. We've got to see if they're wounded. Stop the coach!"

The stager's boot had already slammed the brake forward. On locked wheels the stage skidded to a halt. O'Toole nodded, and his voice was strangely quiet as he wiped blood from his ear, and looked at it against his brown fingers.

"So now," he murmured, "thees fight ees also mine. Nobody lets the blood of Pancho O'Toole without paying the price I ask. And my price is death!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Road to San Berdoo

LIKE a huge cat, he went over the wheel, and Dan followed him to the ground, but neither of them were as quick as the Los Angeles lawyer. Loomis already had the stage door open, and his words blistered the air. "If this is your idea of showing my niece some western excitement, O'Toole," he thundered, "I'll cane you within an inch of your life. What is the meaning letting ruffians fire at this coach? May might have been hit."

At her uncle's shoulder, Dan saw the girl's face, and she seemed more surprised than frightened. He felt an unreasonable sense of relief flow through him, and it made him laugh shakily.

"You, you souse," Loomis turned his wrath on Payne. "Laugh, will you? If you think its funny to have bullets whizzing past your head, why you're a bigger fool than I'd figured!"

O'Toole's voice was still soft and without humor when he answered the lawyer. "You, I theenk," he said deliberately, "are the fool. Eet was not the senorita at whom that lead was aimed. *Dios,* no! *Your* death, senor, was what those *cabrones* wanted. Mebbyso you can tell us why they would want your death?"

The thought had entered Dan Payne's mind even while the bullets had been hurtling into the stage, and a better chance to express it might never come. "Perhaps I can answer that better than Mr. Loomis," he said quietly. "If you, in turn, sir, will answer one question before we start."

"And what is that?" the lawyer asked ungraciously.

"Are you on your way to San Bernardino to settle the estate of Nugget Sam Payne?"

"Yes," the hatchet-faced lawyer nodded a little unwillingly. "I'm going to check the credentials of his nephew before the will goes up for probate."

Dan nodded. "When you meet this nephew," he said smoothly, "ask him if he might have any reason for wishing to see you dead."

"Here, here," the lawyer exploded, "just what are you driving at, young man?"

But Dan had turned. He clambered back to the box of the stage pretending that he hadn't heard the lawyer's question.

A moment later O'Toole reached his side, and kicked the brake free. The big breed was chuckling. "And that amigo," he drawled, "was *mucho bueno.* Very good. Mebbyso, since they were not harmed, your frand, Trey Booth, has done you the favor, no? In that lawyer's *cabeza,* you have planted suspicion, but I theenk also that maybe it would have been a good chance for you to name yourself."

"No," Dan shook his head. "There's a lot more to this, Pancho, than either you or I can see now," he went on slowly. "That ambush proves it. Booth has everything he needs to present as proof of his identity so why should he try to kill Loomis?"

O'Toole pursed his lips thoughtfully. *"Por dios,* and I did not think of that, amigo. How do you see eet?"

"If Loomis should die suddenly," Dan said quietly, "it would leave everything just as it stands for the time being, and it begins to look to me like that is all Trey Booth wants."

"But why, senor?" O'Toole said explosively. "The *Tavern of Night* is a plum any *renegado* might desire. Eef he can gain legal possession now that your oncle is dead, why should he try to keel the man who can give him that right?"

Dan braced his long legs against the footrest, and stared unseeingly at the dun desert rolling away before them. The road was a tawny, crooked ribbon stretching across it, and somewhere out in the dim distance ahead lay San Bernardino, and the heart of mystery.

Above the whine of the wind and rattle of trace chains, Dan answered the stager slowly, fitting words to the thoughts gradually taking shape in his mind.

"There's just about one answer to your question, Pancho," he said after a long pause. "One reason why Trey Booth doesn't want any Los Angeles lawyer questiong his control of The Tavern of Night."

"And eet is, senor?"

"That even with my credentials and clothes, he knows that possession can be only temporary."

"You have said that once before, senor," O'Toole's brow wrinkled. What ees eet that makes you so sure?"

Dan's hazel eyes had narrowed to slits, and his words came slowly. *"Because Booth knows that Nugget Sam Payne isn't dead!"*

The morning was cool, but sweat broke suddenly on the stager's forehead. "How can you say that, amigo, when I myself rode in the procession and saw his coffin lowered into the ground?"

"You saw his coffin," Dan said grimly. "You didn't see Sam! The swamper, Prentiss, has also vanished. That leaves the undertaker. I'm paying him my first

visit when we reach San Bernardino."

"And I, too!" O'Toole said explosively. "You weel need gons and a bright *cuchillo* to back your hand in that City of Sin, amigo, for I theenk the trail we weel follow will lead us close to death."

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THE trail they had been following had already led them close to ambush death, but it was no more deadly than the sudden drunken lurch of the stage as the vehicle crossed a last strip of cut-bank road, and dropped into a dry barranca at the base of the hills they had just crossed.

Dan felt the seat seem to drop from beneath him as the left rear wheel collapsed with a splintering crash of broken felloes and the whine of twisted metal. Running mules smashed together at the sudden drag of the coach, and only the magic of Pancho O'Toole's hands on the reins kept the stage from capsizing.

Like a grizzly on the prowl, O'Toole leaped down from the box. His eyes, as they lifted momentarily to the Bostonian, were full of pure rage.

"Riders always claim I try to break their necks, but never yet have I lost a coach, passenger, or time on thees trip. That wheel she was solid last night. I grease and check my own stage. Now we will see—"

Dan hit the ground behind the breed. O'Toole had turned and was moving toward the rear of the slanting coach. Inside it, Dan could hear the lawyer struggling to open one of the doors, and in the same breath demanding the scalp of O'Toole for trying to kill him. The sound of Loomis' voice brought a grin of relief to Payne's lips. No man would be wasting breath blaspheming the driver if either he or his niece were hurt. This ride to San Berdoo, he reflected a little irrevelantly, was certainly proving interesting.

"*Mira!* Look you, amigo," O'Toole was gesturing with one big hand at the shattered remains of the wheel. "Eet does not take the eyes of a veteran to see the square cut halfway through the spokes. A saw she worked on thees wheel last night, and then dirt was rubbed into the cuts so they would not show thees morning. Only the grace of God kept thees accident from happening on the grade. Eef it had—" his shrug was more expressive than words.

Dan knelt and examined the wheel. He heard the girl and her uncle come around the boot of the stage, and the lawyer was complaining raspily as usual.

"Trying to kill us," he asserted. "O'Toole, you'll never drive another stage for the San Berdoo Express, I promise you that. I am a director of the Company—"

"So now you and the senorita weel seet in the sun and grow to look like the cooked lobster, or you will walk with me and Senor Payne to the next *estacion* which is less than a mile from thees barranca. There maybe we will find the extra wheel."

"Payne?" the lawyer said slowly, and his sharp, hawk-eyes were on Dan who had risen swiftly at the disclosure of his name.

Dan's glance touched the girl in passing, and sudden recklessness made him grin. "Daniel Payne, of Boston," he said coolly. "I arrived in San Pedro yesterday on the Pacific Mail steamer, *Red Bird.*"

"This is pure tomfoolery!" Hiram Loomis thrust his head forward like a buzzard peering at carrion. "Daniel Payne is already in San Berdoo, in full charge of his uncle's tavern. I told you I was going to check his credentials. Why didn't you make your preposterous claim when you heard me say that?"

Dan realized now that he had made a mistake. Lawyer Loomis was a man who worked with facts, not suspicion. He drew a deep breath. "I did not think it was the right time to speak for several reasons—"

Loomis cut him short. "Your reasons will never be good," he said acidly. "Don't bring them to me! May," he turned abruptly to his niece, "do you feel up to a walk?"

"Yes," the girl answered her uncle, but her blue eyes were on Dan. "I will enjoy it."

"*Por dios,* and it does not look like you weel have to walk far," Pancho O'Toole muttered. His massive arm gestured at the farther rim of the barranca in which they had stalled.

Dan swung half around, and he felt his teeth clench with surprise and anger. A

shiny buggy with a natty, frilled canopy to protect its occupants from the sun was drawn up at the top of the road. A heavy-set man, wearing the black of a professional gambler held the reins over the pair of spanking bays in the traces. At his side sat Trey Booth.

Trey Booth, looking very elegant in the one good suit of broadcloth, Daniel Payne had brought with him from Boston.

Dan watched the man lift his tall gray beaver with a flourish. "Mr. Loomis?" he addressed the lawyer in the same pleasant voice Dan remembered from the night before.

"Yes," the Los Angeles barrister nodded.

"I am Daniel Payne, of Boston," Trey Booth said smoothly. "Your recent letter mentioned that you and your niece were arriving today, and I and my friend, Mr. Slade, took the liberty of driving out half way to meet you. We saw the stage fail to appear from this wash, and so we came on ahead."

"The road to San Berdoo," Dan heard O'Toole mutter ruefully, "has always been full of surprises. But thees day, she beats all the rest!"

The lawyer's hawkish old face wrinkled in a sudden smile. "Splendid!" he exclaimed. "My niece, May Loomis, Mr. Payne. We will be most delighted to accept your offer. These, these ruffians are hardly the company for her and when attempts are made to murder us, and drunks claim false identity, I am more than ready to accept your offer. Driver," he ended preemptorily, "get our luggage from the boot."

Pancho O'Toole's round face was bland when he glanced at the lawyer. "Senor," he drawled, "do you forget that you have tied the can to my tail?"

"Now, now that was just—" Loomis began.

Trey Booth's pleasant voice cut the lawyer short. "Bert will get your luggage," he said smoothly. "I have quarters prepared for you at *El Taverna del Noche*. I'm sure your stay will be pleasant."

Dan had been edging slowly closer to the girl where she stood at the rear of the crippled coach. A man couldn't talk to the lawyer, but if he could put a word of warning in the ear of May Loomis she might at least be able to make her uncle wary of the smooth impersonator.

"May," he spoke her name in a whisper as he drifted close behind her, "stay away from the Tavern of Night. Tell your uncle. Make him insist on taking rooms in town. You're—"

Boots crunched around the opposite end of the stage, and the dark-garbed Slade swung into view. The man's heavy face was arrogant. "Here you—" he grated—"stay away from that lady!"

Dan turned to meet the gambler, and all the trouble that had blanketed him since setting foot in Los Angeles found its way into the power of his sledging right fist as he struck straight out from his shoulder. The most pleasure he had experienced in California came with the solid slap of his knuckles against the gambler's jaw.

Bert Slade sat down abruptly in the sandy bottom of the barranca. Dan stood where he had been, fists still clenched. "Get up," he invited.

Slade's eyes were the brown of agate. Narrowed slits in his full face, his hand moved with snakish speed beneath his coat.

"No, senor." The soft words stopped the gambler. Pancho O'Toole had moved backward with cat-like speed for one so large. Now he was in a position to command this whole scene, and Dan heard the oily click of twin Navy Colts coming to full cock. "No, senor," the breed repeated. "Leave your gon alone. You, too, Senor Booth," he added. "There ees a senorita present. Besides I theenk we weel have plenty of time to play with the gons in the future, no?"

CHAPTER THREE

Graveyard Ghost

IT WAS night when Pancho O'Toole's morning stage arrived in San Bernardino. Sagging in his seat, the giant breed drove slowly along the town's main street toward the station and barns at its opposite end. Dan glanced at his companion and an amused smile tugged at his lips.

"You act like you'd like to crawl under the floorboards," he murmured.

"Por dios, and I would!" Pancho

O'Toole groaned. "Me, the bes' damned stage driver from San Francisco to the border, and thees is when I come into town. Ten hours late. A *Madre mia* eet is good that thees Loomis is going to have the can tied to my tail. *Mira,* already the devils in this town start to make the fon with me."

Good-natured shouts were coming at them from the teeming boardwalks on either side. This was a rough and ready town, ready for fight or frolic. Here was the heart of a new inland empire. Emigrants were arriving from the east to take possession of the rich farm lands about San Berdoo. Prospectors, driven from the northern California gold fields by the pinching out of the placers were making this their headquarters while they prospected the Southern Sierras for new strikes. Desert rats from the high San Rafaels and the Panamints beyond bought their supplies here. Here, too, was the junction of the California-Arizona Trace for supplies that came around the Horn had to be freighted overland to Yuma and Prescott. A rich town, Dan thought a little grimly. A place where a man who had cut his Eastern roots might live in peace and grow with the new community. He wondered, a little irrelevantly, if the same thought might have entered May Loomis' head.

Then his attention was snapping to the decorously lighted windows of an adobe building on their right. HILL & HILL, Undertakers, had been stenciled on the glass. Dan caught at O'Toole's arm.

"Are those the people who buried my uncle?" he asked.

"*Si,*" Pancho nodded. "They are two brothers, and their beezness ees very good. Mos' times we have at least wan man for breakfast in thees town. The light shows they are at work even now."

"Good," Dan nodded. He rose lithely, put one foot to the edge of the box.

"Amigo, where you go?" Alarm came into the breed's voice.

"To have a little talk with the Hills," Dan told him grimly. "I'll be along to the depot by the time you've finished turning in your report on the ride we've had today. Pancho," his lean face hardened, "Booth has Loomis and his niece, and you can bet they won't get away from him until he accomplishes whatever devilish plans he's got concerning the Tavern of Night."

"And we must learn of those plans before that cussed lawyer will leesten to us, no?"

"Yes," Dan nodded. "This is the first step. Maybe I'll have a line on our second move after I see the Hills."

"*Bueno,*" O'Toole grinned suddenly, "and I weel be glad to have no more job, for I theenk thees trail we follow will be much better ee-sport than driving the stage!"

Dan leaped nimbly down from the box of the slow-moving coach, and strode to the boardwalk in front of the funeral parlor. He rapped on the closed door, thought ironically that the conversational line he had planned to use here would fit in well with his dusty, disheveled appearance.

He heard feet approaching down an inside corridor, and after a moment the door opened. A little, middle-aged man with an amiable round face peered out at him hopefully. He lost his smile when he saw no sign of a corpse behind the tall visitor.

Dan grinned, and stepped inside. "Sorry I'm not bringing you any business, Mr. Hill," he said pleasantly. "Fact is, I've come to make some enquiries about one of your past customers."

The undertaker began to look a little doubtful. "Well, I—" he began.

"My name is Morgan," Dan told him smoothly. "Dan Morgan and I received a sad shock upon arriving in your beautiful city. I came to see an old friend of mine, Nugget Sam Payne, and I understand he has been dead for some time. I'm wondering if you could give me any of the particulars as to how it happened.

"Wa'al now," the undertaker reached up, and tugged at his thatch of graying hair, "it was sure a sad thing, Mr. Morgan. Sam Payne got so badly tromped by a maddened mule he was trying to break that we couldn't even let any of his friends see the remains. No sir, we just had to screw the coffin-lid down and say nothing doing, boys. We buried him in Gods Half Acre, which is what we call our cemetery, and I'm afraid nobody will see Nugget Sam again. His nevvy is here now, out at Sam's Tavern of Night, and you might like to go and talk to him. Seems like a right nice chap, yes sir, I think you'd

better go and talk to him. Nice chap."

Dan nodded, and he felt excitement quicken his blood. He had learned one thing from the little undertaker's talk. The man, Trey Booth, and these undertakers were in this thing together. It showed in Hill's insistence that he call on Booth. And yet, if Nugget Sam Payne had had any reason for wanting to vanish from San Berdoo this undertaker would have had to help. The threads of mystery were growing more tangled.

"Thanks," Dan murmured, and swung back to the boardwalk. "I'll see the nephew."

Head tipped down in thought, he turned to the right, and a shuffling Mexican kept him in sight as he pressed through the crowd. Barkers in front of torch-lit saloons wheedled the street throng to enter, "and sample our wares, boys—" Hurdy-gurdies and off-key pianos attempted to attract the customers to other places of amusement. Dan paid them no attention. O'Toole was the man he wanted now. O'Toole and a pair of picks and shovels.

The breed was a huge shadow waiting for him at one corner of the stage station. *"Dios,* and you are queek, senor," he greeted. "The talk must have been *muy simpatico."*

Dan grinned. "Your Spanish beats me, Pancho. But if you mean our talk was simple, you're wrong. I got just one thing out of it. Either Hill is playing his cards with Booth, or else I'm wrong, and Nugget is really dead. It's up to us to find out. We need picks and shovels to do it."

Pancho's eyes widened. "You mean we go for to open hees grave? *Carramba!* I did not theenk of that. But eet can be done, senor. Now. Pronto. There are shovels and the picks in the shed out back. Come, amigo. If thees job ain't done before the moon she rise over San Gorgonio Pass, the wrong wans might see us, and that would be *muy malo* bad!"

It took twenty minutes of hard walking to reach the graveyard, located on a hillside at the outskirts of town. God's Half Acre was shadowy with the mounds and white crosses of those who had departed. The big breed threaded his way between the graves, climbing the hill.

Behind him Dan shook his head. "If somebody had told me I'd be excavating a grave on my second night in California, I'd have called them crazy," he murmured.

"You are not the only wan," Pancho O'Toole snorted. "We are both loco in the *cabeza,* or we would not be doing thees theeng. Nugget Sam ees dead."

Thirty minutes of fast pick and shovel digging uncovered the coffin. Starlight revealed the plain, pine-board lid, and the big screws anchoring it.

Looking down at it, Dan felt faintly sick. "Give me that screw-driver you brought along," he said at last, "and climb out. I was the only Boston relative he gave a damn for. If he's inside maybe he won't mind my disturbing him."

Pancho scrambled from the grave which they had widened so they could stand alongside the coffin. *"Dios,"* he muttered, "I hope thees is something I never have to do again."

Dan went to work. He had the screws loosened within a few minutes, and using the screw-driver for a pry he gently lifted the lid. He had half-expected the stench of death to reach his nostrils, but no odor came from the pine box. He pressed the lid back. Starlight glowed dimly on the coffin's contents. There was nothing inside but rocks packed in burlap!

"Soooo—" Pancho O'Toole was the first to utter a sound. "That ees all we find. *"Sacramento!* Eef the people of San Berdoo learn of this what you call hoax there will be all hell in a basket to pay. They will start asking why did Nugget Sam Payne weesh to make himself look dead? They will ask where he has gone? What ees he doing? Those are only a few of the questions they will ask."

"And those are only a few we're going to ask the Hills when we get back to town," Dan said as he climbed from the grave and picked up his shovel. "It proves they're in this thing to the hilt."

"There ees wan more thing, too, senor," O'Toole added soberly. "Your oncle disappeared for some beeg reason of his own. His secret we must also protect, even if I have to slit throats to do eet!"

THE moon was rising above the notch of high San Gorgonio Pass when they reached town for the second time that night. Street crowds had

begun to thin out, but there was still light showing in Hill & Hill's Undertaking Parlors.

"*'Sta bueno,*" Dan heard the breed mutter. "They are still here, and thees time we will go in without knocking eef the door is unlocked."

The latch lifted beneath Dan's hand. As he led the way down the dimly lit hall inside, he heard the faint whisper of Pancho O'Toole's Colts leaving holster leather.

At the end of the hall was another closed door, but Dan could see a crack of light coming from beneath it, and as he drew nearer the sound of two men talking came through the thin panel. Once again the latch lifted to his touch, and he stepped into the morgue and work shop of the establishment. Completed coffins lined the walls. Others being built stood on sawhorses about the big, gloomy room. Three sheet-covered shapes were stretched on a heavy table straight across from them. Dan saw all that at a glance, as Pancho ghosted to his side.

The Hill brothers were standing side by side in front of the table that held the shrouded bodies. Wearing somber black, they looked so much alike that Dan could hardly be certain which of the men he'd spoken to earlier in the evening. Both of them had the same round, amiable faces, and lips that seemed to be perpetually smiling. Dan caught the sudden impression that this pair had been expecting them, and he knew instantly that they had walked into a trap.

"Gentlemen," one of the Hill's said, and it was a signal for all hell to break loose.

Dan caught a confused glimpse of men lifting from every open coffin, a sight of those shrouded figures on the table throwing aside their covering, and then weight dropping down from above smashed him to the floor.

He heard Pancho O'Toole's Colts roar once, and then men were piling on them from every side. Dan rolled and managed to reach his knees. It was taking a half dozen of the dark-faced breeds who had come out of hiding to subdue the giant O'Toole. And then beyond that pile Dan spotted the elegant shape of Trey Booth. A slight smile played beneath the man's silken mustache. He was enjoying this. The sight maddened Dan. With a heave he almost reached his feet, then two breeds knifing in from either side knocked him to the floor again. A boot caught him behind the ear, and the long shape of Booth seemed to vanish before his eyes. . . .

Cool water against his face awakened Dan Payne. It contrasted oddly with the beating pain inside his skull, and for the space of a minute he could not remember just what had happened, then memory of the trap they'd walked into came back to him.

With an effort he managed to pry his eyes open a slit, then they were widening of their own accord, for May Loomis was bending over him. Dim light from the lantern suspended beneath cobwebbed beams overhead made a pale, golden nimbus of her hair. Her lips widened in a smile at sign of Dan's awakening.

"Uncle, Pancho," she called softly. "Dan's come to."

Dan heard the whisper of feet through musty straw, and he realized they were in a stable of some kind. Then O'Toole's brown face loomed above him, and beside him was the wrinkled, saturnine lawyer.

"This looks almost like a family reunion!" Dan managed to murmur. "All we need to make it complete is Nugget Sam."

"And I'm ready to apologize to you young man!" Hiram Loomis said sincerely. "I'm sorry to say I was completely taken in, even after May managed to give me your warning. Booth's credentials

Harry F. Olmsted, who has written many fine stories for this magazine, will be up next month with the feature novel— "War On The Steel Trail." It's a great story of pioneer railroading. Don't miss the December 10 STORY WESTERN—on sale Nov. 10th!

looked so authentic, I couldn't doubt them."

"The records," Dan said dryly, "were authentic." He pressed himself to a sitting position, and the narrow box stall they were in whirled dizzily for a moment then steadied. "You see, they were mine."

"I know that now to my sorrow," Loomis admitted. "We found it out when the brigands that man Booth employs here escorted us to this stable behind the Tavern of Night, and forced us into this stall."

"And by the good *Dios,*" *Pancho* O'Toole broke into the conversation, "they do not know much more than we have already suspected!"

"It seems," the lawyer said in his dry, brittle voice, "that this man Booth wishes to hold the tavern for only a short time longer. He seems to be waiting for someone to return to it. And in the meantime we are all to be held as hostages. If whoever is returning agrees to Booth's terms, whatever they may be, we will be released. Otherwise, that gentleman made it rather plain to me that we might never see Los Angeles again."

"Booth was talking about Nugget Sam," Dan said flatly. With the help of Pancho's arm, he managed to reach his feet. "I think better standing up," he added grimly.

"We have got to do more than think, I theenk," O'Toole growled. "*Carramba,* but I was the beeg fool not to have known that you would have been followed from those undertakers. And when they saw us head for the graveyard, eet was not hard to figure the reason why, and send a fast rider to bring men from the taverna."

"Figuring out whose fault this is," Dan grunted, "isn't getting us out of here."

"And what eef we do escape?" the big breed snapped. "Are we then to run around like the chicken with its head off? Two, mebbe three things, are all we know. Nugget, he ees alive. He play the beeg trick on San Berdoo so that he can slip away, probably weeth this swamper Prentiss, to wherever they want to go. *Bueno.* But where ees that, and what does he do there to make thees Booth also play the treek to hold the *taverna* until his return. Surely the Hills they know for they must have been the ones who brought thees Booth to impersonate Senor Payne here. Sooo, we would like to escape and warn Nugget Sam to stay away from his taverna. But we mus' know where he has gone, before we can ride to warn heem!"

Dan nodded. O'Toole had summed up their problems. His head was still aching, but it had settled to a steady throbbing now that the trouble they were in was enough to make him forget.

His eye caught on a water bucket and dipper placed against one wall of the stall, then swung to the door barring their escape. Cut across the middle, the upper half could be swung open to allow ventilation for animals stabled here.

"A guard is stationed in the runway outside," Loomis explained. "We have no chance."

Dan turned his chilly eyes on the lawyer. "I've never been much good at giving up," he murmured flatly. "Pancho, hand me that water bucket. I'll follow you to the door. Pound on the upper section, and yell to the guard that our bucket has been tipped over. Tell him you must have more water to wake me up. When he opens the top section, duck. A bucket of water in the face ought to surprise him enough to give one of us the chance to go over the lower half of the door"

"*Dios,* and I will be that wan!" O'Toole exclaimed. "My gons and *cuchillo* are gone, but I still have my hands, and they weel be enough. Let us do thees pronto, amigo mio!"

The hugeness of the breed's body was enough to shelter Dan crouched behind him. Shouting out his demands in a mixture of Spanish and English, O'Toole pummeled the door with his fist.

For the space of a tense minute, Dan thought his ruse might not work, and then he heard the bar on the outside of the door slip from its slot. The upper panel swung slowly open.

"*Quien es?*" the guard began. "What is it—"

Water, a solid chunk of it, drove the words back down his throat, and made him drop the rifle in his hands as he clawed at his face. "O'Toole rose from his crouch, and the spring of his legs lifted him over the lower section of the door. Like a cat, he landed in the runway, and Dan saw his big hands close like talons

about the guard's throat before the man could utter a cry. In seconds the Mexican's body grew limp.

"We want him alive," Dan warned. "Somebody's got to tell us where Nugget went. Maybe he—"

Pancho O'Toole had dropped the Mexican like a limp bundle of rags, and his hands were hastily at work stripping cartridge belts and Colts from about the man's middle.

"Mira," he gestured toward the rear courtyard beyond the opposite end of the open runway bisecting the barn. "Look you. There ees no need to ask thees hombre any questions. Nugget Sam ees already here!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Mine of Seven Deaths

REACHING across the open section of door, Dan caught the lower bar and freed it. He pushed into the runway with Loomis and his niece close behind. The gray of false dawn was in the sky. By its light, Dan saw a string of packed burros standing at the hitch-rail in this rear courtyard. Three saddled horses were tethered alongside the burros. All of the animals were sagging with fatigue.

"The beeg gray," Pancho O'Toole was saying, "belongs to Nugget Sam. I have seen the horse many times. Here, senor," he pressed one Colt and belt that had been about the guard's waist into Dan's hands. "I hope you know one end of eet from another."

"I do!" Dan said. His eyes turned briefly to the lawyer and May Loomis. "Stay here," he advised them quietly.

"But you?" the girl had drawn close to Payne's side.

Dan smiled down at her. "We're going into the tavern," he told her gently, "and do all that two men can. Sometimes surprise is the best weapon of all. If we come back—" he let the clasp of his hand finish the sentence.

"Carramba," O'Toole was growling, "cannot thees talk wait? We must feenish here before anything else can count."

With a nod, Dan followed the big breed into the courtyard. Pancho O'Toole was right, he reflected bleakly. There could be no peace in San Bernardino for either of them while Trey Booth lived.

"Do not walk too fast, senor," Pancho warned softly. "Eef we are sighted in thees light, perhaps we will be mistaken for some of that *cabrone's compadres,* and allowed to enter the taverna without question."

Dan nodded tightly. He had his eyes on the long, low building before them. In the gray morning light, the Tavern of Night was not impressive. Tall, weeping willow trees surrounded it on three sides. Dan studied them briefly, then spoke to O'Toole through lips that barely moved.

"If Nugget left his pack train and saddle horses here in back, he probably walked in from this side, too."

"Si," the big breed nodded. "There is a hall with sleeping rooms on either side. At the other end it opens into the taverna. There the bar ees, and the tables."

"And there we'll find Nugget Sam and whoever rode in with him while we were locked up," Dan murmured.

"They have not been eenside long," Pancho O'Toole pointed out. "Thees morning air is crisp from the snow on the San Rafaels. See the steam still rises from the flanks of those burros. They have come far and fast, and not yet had the time to cool off."

"Good," Dan murmured. They were drawing close to the tavern now, and he spoke hurriedly. "If Nugget put his head into that lion's den inside, Booth and his men *will be facing this way looking at them.* So if we skirt the trees and *walk in from the front* we might be able to cover them all with our guns before they even see us."

"Por dios," admiration glowed momentarily in the breed's dark eyes, "you weel make a good Californio someday if you theenk that straight all of the time. The chance is worth the try. We weel be two against mebbe ten, and those are odds that even I do not like."

As they dodged through the trees along the right side of the adobe, Dan reached down to loosen the borrowed Colt in its worn holster at his thigh. Fingers tightening about the stock of the weapon, he felt the sudden bite of a metal. A ring, he

thought suddenly, that might add an extra touch of surprise when the time came. He slipped it into his left hand held it loosely as they moved to the front of the tavern.

No one was in sight, and Dan felt taut muscles along the back of his sore neck start to relax. Ten paces ahead of them a dark oak door stood open. Rifle held in his huge bear-paw of a hand, O'Toole led the way toward it, and then a roaring voice that Dan recognized stopped them both.

"You, my nevvy?" Nugget Sam Payne was shouting. "What the hell do I care for pieces of paper. I got eyes, ain't I? You look about as much like a Payne as some lizard-eating Paiute!"

Dan could just imagine Trey Booth's elegant shrug as he said, "Boys, your guns. No, don't move Mr. Payne, unless you wish to die quickly. Now, perhaps we can talk on even footing. I had hoped to avoid trouble."

"I see I've been a big blamed fool," Nugget Sam growled. "Knew my nevvy would arivin' any day, and I pushed the jacks to git here first. Figured he might really think I was daid. And speakin' of that, what have you done with Dan'l, you two-bit shypoke?"

"Your nephew is alive, Mr. Payne," the silken-voiced gambler said patiently. "I took care of him in Los Angeles. He awoke yesterday morning with quite a headache, I imagine, and a poke of gold in his pocket. As I had taken his money-belt and credentials, it was necessary for me to provide him with enough money to reach San Berdoo. I wanted him here where I could put my hands on him if it became necessary. That necessity arose, I am sorry to say. He, and a certain Pancho O'Toole found it necessary to investigate your psuedo grave, and then call on the Hill brothers. "

"Them whelps!" Nugget Sam raged. "They sold me out—"

"After you offered them ten percent of whatever you, Prentiss, and your desert rat friend, Sidewinder Jones found in The Mine of Seven Deaths in the Panamints. You feared word of Jones discovery of that fabulous mine opened by the *Conquistadores* might get out, and to throw possible pursuers off your trail you had the Hills stage a funeral for a corpse that was already crossing over the San Rafaels!"

Dan glanced at Pancho O'Toole, and a grin forced its way to his lips. The big stage driver was standing with his mouth hanging open, wholly absorbed in the conversation they were overhearing. He couldn't blame his companion. The talk was enough to surprise any man. Even in faroff Boston, Dan had heard the legend of the lost mine of Seven Deaths.

Avaricious *Conquistadores* had pressed captured desert Indians into service in its depths, and eventually the captured had revolted and become the conquerors. They had taken their seven overlords and sealed them into the shaft to die. Then they had covered the entrance so that no man would ever find the mine again.

It was little wonder, he reflected grimly, that the Hills had been willing to break confidence to gamble for greater stakes.

Trey Booth was speaking again. "It was too late to try and trail you by the time I got here. So we took over your tavern. It has been an ideal place to wait for you."

"An' what about my nevvy?" Nugget Sam demanded hoarsely.

"He is safe," Trey Booth purred, "along with some other friends of yours. Namely, O'Toole, and your lawyer Hiram Loomis. I neglected to mention that Mr. Loomis' niece is also with them. She might not receive the same quick death the others will unless you feel like cooperating with us."

"To the tune of what?" Nugget Sam Payne queried cautiously.

"The map you undoubtedly made locating the route to the Mine of Seven Deaths. Put that in my hand and you will all live. Refuse, and—"

"My ticker's bum now," Nugget Sam chuckled rustily.

"But the rest have years before them. Particularly your nephew and the girl."

"What if I ain't got such a map?" Nugget Sam parried.

Again Dan could imagine the gambler's shrug. "You will all die," he said coolly. "It will be regrettable, but necessary, for to San Berdo you are already dead, and I am Daniel Payne of Boston. This tavern can make me a nice living—and a pleasant home if I can persuade Miss Loomis to live in it with me—"

IF HE had needed a spur to action, Dan Payne had it. A part of his mind was clear and cool weighing the odds against them as he started forward again, and another part of it was seething with hate.

Shoulder to shoulder, they pressed into the wide doorway, and the only men facing them were Nugget Sam Payne, Prentiss, and the desert rat, Sidewinder Jones.

Booth had one elbow on the mahogany bar-top to one side. The rest of his hirelings were grouped in a semi-circle.

Dan tossed the ring in his left hand so that it rolled across the floor to Trey Booth's feet.

"One mark of identification you overlooked Booth," he said clearly as the gambler's head tipped downward toward the ring. "No don't turn around, any of you. The sheriff has a calaboose waiting for your kind. And in the morning he'll pick up the Hills." The oily click of his Colt coming to full cock emphasized his remarks.

For the space of a second, Trey Booth stared down at the ring on the floor, and then Dan saw the man's right hand slap the bartop. Bulky Bert Slade, still in his black, rose from behind the mahogany, gripping a stub-barrelled shotgun.

Dan snapped one shot at the man, and saw the force of lead knock him backward before he could trigger, but the damage had been done. It had given other guns time to turn in their direction, but it had also diverted attention from Nugget Sam and his companions.

With a whopp, the elder Payne joined the sudden mad fight. Behind him, as he leaped forward toward the gambler, Dan heard the rifle bellow once in Pancho O'Toole's hands, and then the Colt.

Trey Booth, and he alone, was the leader here. Once downed, his Mexican henchmen would seek to flee, not fight, Dan realized. He felt lead slice through his soiled shirt and score his ribs with searing fire, but he was too close to the gambler now to pay any attention.

Booth had swung around. His hands were coming from inside his coat, freighted with double-barreled derringers.

"This time you're going to do the sleeping," Dan said, and he hardly heard his own voice as the Colt in his hand bucked before the other could level his weapons. He saw the red splotch that started to redden the front of the gambler's shirt, and he knew the man was dying on his feet, yet still he tried to lift his derringers.

"We'll go together, Payne,—" he got out the words, and then his knees loosened, pitching him forward.

"Entraga, Entraga!" the cry was rising about the room. "We surrender." "Dios," one of the Mexican's was crying, "give us jail, not death—"

Blood was flowing freely from Pancho O'Toole's arm, and Nugget Sam Payne had a red gash through the gray beard that mantled his face when the three of them met across the prone figure of Booth.

"Blast me," Nugget Sam Payne was grinning at his nephew. "You're a shot, and yuh don't mind facing lead when the cards are down. I allus knew you were the kind of man Californy could use. And as far as I'm concerned you can name your own game. Five of those jacks outside are loaded with gold ingots, and there's more where she came from. Them Injuns done a right fine job of hiding the entrance to the Mine of Seven Deaths until a flash flood come along and undid their work. Sidewinder, who I been grubstakin' come along and found the old workings. We're all going to be rich soon as I git to the Recorder's Office, and set down the location of the claim."

Dan shook his head at Nugget Sam, and his hazel eyes were sober. "Stake me to a farm and house," he said, "and if I can get the right girl to live in it I'll be richer than you!"

Nugget Sam Payne had been looking across Dan's shoulder, and his faded eyes had started to twinkle. "I dunno whether you're going to git the girl," he announced, "but she shore as heck is smilin' like she might like the idee—"

Dan whirled, and he felt his face growing hot. May Loomis, backed by her tall uncle, was standing in the doorway.

"Dan—" she said. "I—"

Pancho O'Toole shaking blood from his fingers grinned, and murmured, *"Dios,* must we have thees weeth everything else? Me, I weel take the *oro* my amigo has declined!"

THE END

HERO-MAKER

By ARTHUR LAWSON

Captain Jeff Carson couldn't take that army deserter back, and he couldn't let him go free—because he had to keep that man's name bright on the company's honor roll—and in the heart of the girl Jeff loved!

JEFF CARSON swung to the easy, dainty-footed trot of his Nancy mule, alert as a mountain bighorn despite the curiously sleepy appearance given him by his ragged outfit of peaked cap, tattered gray jacket, and bright blue overalls. Though he had been back from war only a few weeks he had learned that the brush country along the upper Brazos near Pecan Creek was as full of Comanches and border ruffians as it was of mis-

branded cattle. So Jeff was not especially surprised when a gun barked to the left and a high-powered rifle bullet whistled past not ten inches from his chin.

In less than a second Jeff was off that mule and lying prone in the brush. Nancy ran for about fifty yards up-trail where she halted to wait patiently for her boss. If anybody else chose to fork her she would kick him to a pulp.

Meanwhile Jeff lay still wishing he had had time in which to dirty up those brilliant blue overalls so that they would not shine out so in the woods. He could detect no movement or sound from the direction of the shooting.

Then the brush swished, informing Jeff that he need not worry that a Comanche had fired that shot. An Indian would have waited hours before venturing forth to find out if his victim had been killed. Probably some fool of a road agent, Jeff reckoned, willing to kill on the chance that he might be able to rob the body of some hard money. Jeff smiled grimly because he was ready for his assailant.

Jeff had a cap-and-ball Navy Colt that he had won from a drunken sailor in Saint Louis during a poker game. It was almost worth while fighting a war if you could bring home such weapon as this one.

Now the swishing of the brush was closer. Jeff checked on cylinder and cap. Everything was in fine shape. That hombre was going to stumble right on top of him if he did not watch out.

Then the thicket across trail parted about crawling height from the ground and a dirty-faced, tow-headed youngster came into sight, his blue eyes wide and frightened. Dressed in flour-sack britchers and shirt made so recently the printing could still be read, he was clutching at one shoulder with a tiny hand, and was obviously searching for Jeff. He could not have been more than six or seven years old.

Not a very formidable adversary. Jeff recognized him as Jimmy Locke whose Ma and Pa were Yankees from Ohio who had settled in the big bend about fifteen miles upstream the year the war started. They had not become very popular in this region and Jeff was not well acquainted with them.

His distrust of all Yankees was instinctive, made even more positive through four hard years of campaigning with Jeb Stuart. He did not think the Locke's were the kind who would send their son out to flush him so that they could get in another shot. But Jeff could not be sure—and he had come this far only because he had been a cautious man.

He lay still. He set the pistol down on the hot red earth and waited. Jimmy crossed the path, glancing up and down once before doing so and apparently spotting the riderless mule. He smiled at the beast with grim satisfaction, then blundered ahead. When he stepped off the trail Jeff reached for him, slapped a big hand over the boy's mouth so that he could not yell and hugged the child's tiny legs close to his chest so that he could not thrash around.

Jimmy tried to bite him. He clawed at Jeff, and wriggled like a catfish. He was harder to handle than a brace of wildcats. Within a second or two Jeff knew that anybody within a hundred yards could hear their struggle, so he held the boy away from him and let him go.

Jimmy's baby-blue eyes were shifty. As soon as he could do so he put his hand back to his shoulder, rubbing it as if it were in pain. Jeff recovered the Navy Revolver. He tried to watch the kid and listen to the woods at the same time. Except for a squirrel that had come over to scold both of them there was no other sign of man or beast in the immediate neighborhod. Jeff began to think he might have made a mistake. Maybe this child was not bait for a trap, after all.

Suddenly Jimmy confirmed it.

"Next time I won't miss you, Mister," he said, childishly bitter.

"You won't get another chance, Bub. When I tell your Ma an' Pa what you done, they'll whup the living daylights clear out of you and back in again. They won't let you near enough a gun to try and shoot it at me."

Jeff got off the ground. He backtrailed the boy to find the old muzzle-loading army rifle Jimmy had used in his bushwhack attempt. The rifle was longer than the boy was tall. Its weight had been too much for him to handle so he had propped up the muzzle on a couple forked sticks,

aimed it by guessing how high a man on horseback would be, and had waited for his victim. When he had pulled the trigger the recoil of the rifle had knocked him down and bruised his shoulder.

The boy had crawled through the brush after Jeff. Now he shrilly demanded:

"Give me my gun—you damn rebel."

Jeff held the rifle out of reach. "I'll give it to your Pa. And I'll tell him you swore at me. Now, git back on the trail, Button, and I'll ride you home."

The boy became sullen again. "Talkin' of Ma an' Pa whuppin' me ain't foolin' me a bit, Mister," he said with a wisdom despair had given him far beyond his years. "I know *you* killed them. They said you was goin' to."

The boy's Ma and Pa killed? Jeff's voice softened.

"I never killed them," he said. "I've been in Fort Howland all week. I didn't have anything against your Ma and Pa."

"They was Yankees," the boy stated with astonishing logic. "You been killing Yankees for four years. They said so."

Jimmy had given a curious twist to the word, *they*. It made Jeff suspect that *they* might not be Jimmy's parents.

"Who are *they?*" he asked.

Jimmy would not answer. He would only repeat: "You killed them."

* * *

Jeff's old white horse, Gen'l Lee, was near the tiny adobe shack Jeff had built on the burned-out ruins of his once roomy home. He trotted up when he sniffed old friends and nuzzled at Nancy, then at Jeff. He looked suspiciously upon the small boy who stared back with nothing but enmity in his bright eyes.

"No sugar this time, Gen'l," Jeff told the horse. "Wagon train down from Shreveport got itself raided by a bunch of Red River renegades."

The horse understood the first two words and wheeled away, whinied at Nancy suggesting that they play for a while. The mule waited until Jeff had pulled the saddle before running down to the creek to roll in the damp sand. The youngster hung around the shanty staring at everything in it.

There were a few iron pots Jeff had dug from the ashes of his ranch-house and there were parts of a couple horse-pistols, a big iron spoon, some hand-wrought nails and hardware that had come from the same junk pile. Otherwise, except for a bag of food and a blanket on the floor, the room was empty. At the far end the same old fireplace had been patched up to serve the tiny new house. It seemed awfully big in such a small room.

Jeff put all guns and weapons out of reach of Jimmy and then set about getting supper. He had harvested a little wild rice which he threw in a pot with a couple rabbits he had snared. He added wild onions and shelled pecans.

The boy could hardly keep away from the fireplace and the smell of food. Now Jimmy was thinking more of eating than he was of revenge. It was not until after they had finished the pungent stew that the boy turned back to the original subject. Jeff was sitting in the doorway smoking a cornshuck cigarro, listening to the birds settling down for the night and the frogs tuning up in the creek. Jimmy had hunkered down beside him to figure things out.

"How far's Red River?" he asked abruptly.

"It's a lot farther than you can go afoot," Jeff said.

"I can ride," Jimmy boasted.

"Sure." Jeff nodded. "But if you try to steal Nancy she'll kick the stuffing out of you—and the Gen'l won't go anyplace at all unless I tell him to."

Jimmy studied Jeff with a great suspicion. This big Texan had read his mind at every turn as if he had told him what he was thinking.

"I'm going there, anyway," Jimmy said. "I'm going to join up with them renegades that stole the sugar."

"I know—" Jeff shrugged—"then the whole bunch of you are going to wipe me out."

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JIMMY shut up again. It was not safe being around this man. He did not miss a thought you ever had. He was worse than Pa and Ma combined. He was something like those two hombres who had warned his Pa about Jeff Carson. He was not quite so ornery-looking, but he kept glancing around all the time and listening just as they had done.

"Them fellers come visiting often?" Jeff asked casually.

"Couple times," Jimmy said without thinking. Then he realized what he had done. He had promised he would not say a word, and now he had spoken right out. He glanced from the corners of his eyes at Jeff. Jeff was staring off toward the Llano Estacado as if he had not heard. Jimmy took a chance. "I don't know about any fellers."

" 'Course not," Jeff said. The red had gone from the sky. Gray was turning black. The crazy curlews were squawking down-creek. Tomorrow morning, Jeff decided, he would ride up to the Locke place for a look-see. Too far to go tonight. He ground out the dead cigarro between finger and thumb, letting shucks and tobacco sift to the ground. Standing up, he stretched the kinks from his tall, lean body.

"Time to turn in—Renegade," he said.

Defiantly the boy answered: "I ain't goin' to bed."

Jeff shrugged. He laid out the horse blanket on one side of the room, and rolled up in his own blanket on the other side. A few minutes later the boy came in. He tried to reach the rifles that hung high on their pegs. He pondered stealing the six-shooter but discovered that Jeff was lying on it. He went back outside but could not find anything in the darkness on which to climb. Finally he returned to the shanty and lay down on the horseblanket. Tomorrow was another day, as his old man had so often said.

" Good night,Bub," Jeff said.

"G'night, Mister," the boy answered.

Then he shuddered. That damn rebel had been awake all the time. . . .

To Jeff everything about the killing, except the motive, was pretty obvious the moment he looked over the scene of murder. The killers had come back, apparently after the boy had left, to fix up things so that it would look as if Comanches had done the job. They had done this in such a way that anyone who knew about Comanches would see that it was a fake. Either they were strangers to this country—or they were trying to appear to be newcomers.

Comanches would have bashed up the water buckets to steal the hoop iron for arrowheads. They would have stolen the family Bible since paper was their favorite material for lining war shields. Instead, the men who had raided this place had just dumped these things on the floor with everything else.

Outside near the corn patch two rude crosses stood crookedly at the head of a pair of graves. The boy admitted he had dug these graves and buried his folks. He could not remember exactly how long ago it had been, nor would he give Jeff any further information. By the dryness of the earth and other sign, Jeff figured that

three or four days had passed since the terrible little funeral. That would give the killers plenty of time in which to get away.

Jeff decided to ride to the fort. He would have to report this double murder, and if he was to find the killers he would do a better job with the boy off his hands. So about noontime they headed easterly at an easy trot, Jeff on the mule, Jimmy on Gen'l Lee's broad back. The youngster fell asleep in the saddle once, nearly tumbling off.

Toward late afternoon when the fort's stockade reared out of the prairie some distance ahead he began to perk up. He had spent so much of the past three years here while waiting for Comanche raids to pass it was like a second home. Jimmy knew just about everybody there.

"Colonel Knight will fix you," he told Jeff with a rebirth of enthusiasm.

Jeff grinned. "Colonel Knight's gone away. They have a Yankee colonel there now. And he don't like little boys."

Jimmy thought that Jeff was rawhiding him. He could hardly believe the truth when they rode through the wide double gate and saw only blue-coated soldiers lounging around the barracks and company store. Always before they had been in gray or buckskins, big fellers with big laughs for a little shaver and plenty of time to whittle a bow or arrow or boat or something.

Then Jeff drew up in front of a long log house. The first change Jimmy noticed was that the Stars and Stripes fluttered on the flagpole. He glanced sidewise at Jeff. This was really familiar territory to Jimmy. This was where he had gone to school during those times he lived at the fort.

"Miss Starr's here," Jeff said. "They didn't fire her. She's inside—waitin' for you."

The boy hesitated. Tears welled in his eyes. Hastily he turned away to slide off the big old white horse's back and run into the schoolhouse. He slammed the door behind him. Jeff leaned from the saddle the better to see. Through the greenish window panes he saw the youngster plow head on into Miss Starr's plain gray skirt. He flung his arms around her, bawling.

She towsled his hair, glancing up at Jeff at the window. She smiled warmly at Jeff.

Jeff made the Plains' Indian sign for "I'll be back." Then he wheeled Nancy, rode down past the barracks to the red sandstone administration building where he reported the murders to the commanding officer. This soldier was cool, efficient, hard as steel. When Jeff had finished his story the colonel said as one soldier to another:

"I'll send out a detail. My guess is, Captain Carson, that the 'they' the boy talks about are part of a band of ex-Jayhawkers working the river. They're arming the Indians—stirring up old hatreds—turning North against South again. We've got to stop it.

Jeff asked: "What are they after, Colonel?"

The colonel shrugged. "It's a rich country. There are millions of head of cattle in the breaks. I think that's what they're after."

Jeff had found mighty few of his own beeves—thousands carrying brands he had never seen before. It looked as if these men were well on the way of achieving the goals the colonel thought they had set for themselves.

"I'd admire to join your detail, Colonel," Jeff said. "I know this country pretty well."

The colonel shook his head. Though he called Jeff "Captain" and did not treat him as a vanquished enemy, there were certain rules and laws.

"Can't allow it," he said. "We really need you—but—"

Jeff saluted the colonel. He made this gesture sincerely. The war was over for Jeff Carson, recently Captain of Cavalry of the Confederate Army.

"I understand, Sir," he said.

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JEFF stopped off for a couple drinks at the Sutler's bar. It was foul whisky. It seemed to him that all whisky sold in these army camps was terrible. But it warmed his stomach; gave him a chance to look around for strangers; brought him the courage he needed to face his next chore. Funny how Starr, that

black-haired little school teacher, could scare him like a wolf would a rabbit.

He found Starr in the ten-by-twelve lean-to roofed room that constituted her quarters behind the school building. Jimmy was sleeping in the girl's bed. She had given him a bath and supper and he had gone to sleep before she could even turn down the blanket.

Starr smiled at Jeff, brief as summer lightning, and nodded her head toward the schoolroom. He found a bench which he pulled up to the doorway. Then he opened the door and sat down to roll and light a cigarette where the draft would take the smoke outside.

When the girl joined him he was studying a wooden shield over the door on which were painted half a dozen names. *Jefferson Carson, Capt.* was one of them. *Amos Guthrie, Cpl.* was another. Amos had been Starr's older brother. A little black cross had been painted beside his name.

Silently Starr sat on the bench beside Jeff. "Did he always fight—bravely?" she asked quietly.

"Sure," Jeff said. "It was during the Wilderness when General Stuart was killed." He hesitated. This girl's father and mother had both been massacred by Comanches when the army withdrew from the Texas frontier. Her only brother had gone East to fight, never to return. She was the only Guthrie left. "General Custer was against us," he reminisced. "We didn't think much of him then. But he did put up a tough battle. Sure—Amos was a great fighter."

The girl shuddered. Both turned to the doorway to stare across the parade grounds. The war might be over, but peace had not really returned. In some ways what was left was worse than war.

Jeff tried to break the mood. "What did the kid tell you?" he asked.

"He said you killed his parents." Starr spoke in a clear, steady voice. It was as if she had learned a piece to speak. "They were sitting outside the front door. He was in bed. Ma and Pa were kissing. He said they used to kiss each other like that every night but he can't see why anybody would want to kiss Pa. Then *you* shot Pa. Ma got up and ran for the house, hollering. You shot her in the back. She fell inside the door. You were gone when he got out of bed to look for you. He buried them. Then he went hunting for you. He missed you. But he's going to join the renegades and kill you, anyway."

Jeff had bitten the end off his cigarette. He went to the door to spit it out. The manner in which the girl had told the story twisted him up all over again. It was pure hell.

The girl's face was white in the night. Her great dark eyes and wide lovely mouth were steady. She went on with her story.

"He said the fat man and the man with the yeller vest told him you were going to kill the whole family because they were damn Yankees."

Jeff said slowly: "I'll find those skunks. I don't know when—or where. The fat man—and the man with the yellow vest."

The girl said quickly: "The colonel will send out a detail. They'll make a sweep of the whole Llano. Let them—"

"They left an hour ago," Jeff said explosively, "and every Comanche, Kiowa, renegade and owlhooter in Texas already know it. They won't find anything."

The man and girl sat silently on the bench. Soldiers were singing Yankee songs across the parade grounds and the songs of Stephen Foster that had been so popular before the war. Four weary dragoons trotted in through the open gate, back from a scout along the river. The army was doing its best out here, but the army was terribly small and knew nothing of the great country between the Brazos and Pecos Rivers.

Unconsciously Jeff found himself staring at the girl's profile, the round, strong chin, the nose with just a bit too much of an Irish up-tilt to make her look like the dignified school teacher. He thought of her and the kid and the war he had fought and the little house he had started to build when he thought peace had come. Suddenly the girl turned toward him. Her eyes were steady on his. He had something he wanted to tell her but could not find the words. He began to smile. She smiled, too.

"Nervy little kid, ain't he?" Jeff said quickly. "Tried to plug me. Nearly made it. How's his shoulder? That rifle was bigger'n he was."

"It's badly bruised," she said. "It'll be all right, though."

Neither was talking about the subject uppermost in their minds.

"Funny—that crack about his Ma an' Pa kissing," Jeff said. "He couldn't savvy why anybody would want to kiss his Pa."

The girl was again staring over the parade grounds, not seeing anything but the soft blurr of night and a myriad of flickering yellow lights. The cowboy's laughter gave way to silence.

In a whisper, the girl said: "I could understand."

Jeff turned quickly to her. What did she mean by that? He touched her elbow. She jerked her arm away. He moved down the bench, reaching for her. She jumped up. He followed quickly. He was unpracticed at this sort of thing, only instinct telling him he was right. He caught her before she could run away and, with both big hands high on her back, he pressed her to him. For an instant she shock of finding her in his arms was so great he nearly dropped her. Then her head fell back and her eyes were wide with fright and he had to do something to reassure her.

He kissed her. Long moments later she twisted her face away. For a while she clung to him, slowly rubbing her cheek against his rough shirt.

"Jimmy told me something else," she said. "He told me you were rounding up your beef and branding them with a star."

"Sure," Jeff said. "Feller's got to have a ranch, don't he? Got to brand your beef if you're to know they're yours. What's the matter with a star?" He was quite belligerent about it.

Starr Guthrie said: "Nothing. . . . I hope—I hope it's right—for a ranch."

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THE fat man and the man with the yellow vest, Jeff reasoned, would let the cavalry scout pass them on the Llano Estacado somewhere and then emerge again to go about their business in the safe area behind the dragoons. Nor was it long before evidence turned up to prove he was right. On the third day out, trailing the scouting party, he turned up a gulch that would make a likely hiding place. Here wild plums grew, also the bitter grapes that were so good for cutting dryness in the throat. There was a good chance of flushing some Indians up here, too—or maybe the gentlemen he was stalking.

But the gulch was empty except for a couple of buzzards that tried to fly away as he approached. They had gorged themselves to such an extent they could not get off the ground. They could only run, waddling like some kind of strange duck born in hell.

Jeff let them go. He stepped from the saddle to study the remains of a buffalo the buzzards had been eating. The beast had been shot in the neck some four or five days ago. His tongue had been cut out and his tenderloin taken. The buzzards had torn him up mighty badly, but Jeff was pretty sure that those two parts were the only ones taken by the men who had killed the buffalo.

He went on farther up the gulch until he came to a little pool below a spring that had almost run dry. Here the wild grapes were the thickest and, as he reached up to pick one of the deep purple bunches he saw that someone had preceded him to this particular vine and that whoever it was must be shorter than he for the best bunches were high, yet within Jeff's reach.

He learned something else. He found where horses had been unsaddled and had rolled in the grass. These horses were pintos of an unlikely combination, or one was a gray and the other a chestnut. They could not have been mules, for they had left prints too wide for mule-shoes.

Now Jeff had a pretty good picture of the fat man and the man with the yellow vest. They were of medium height. They had plenty to eat. They knew this country. One of their horses was chestnut. The other was gray.

Jeff went on, following them, trailing them by day and sleeping at night, always careful to camp away from water and at some distance from his mule. He soon learned that these men were not running away; that they were only trying to lose their identity while remaining in the same neighborhood. Soon it was certain that they were not strangers to Pecan Creek.

One morning Jeff was scouting the rim of the Llano Estacado, the great Staked Plains of Texas, when the sun came up and suddenly he could see for miles. Far to the north a small herd of buffalo was sending up a dust cloud that shone like a crimson pile of snow down low on the horizon. To the south a band of antelope broke from cover, running hard, apparently frightened away from water.

Jeff was smiling as he brought his mule back into the rough breaks. He now knew where his men were.

Yet it was pure accident that verified this belief. He expected to find them at the big spring where the antelope had watered, for he had decided that they must be hiding out by day and moving at night, moving just enough to keep from establishing a camping ground that would give them away. The fact that the antelope had been scared up in the morning convinced him of this.

So he approached the spot with the utmost care, going ahead afoot after leaving Nancy where she could graze and would keep quiet.

While working along the edge of a plum thicket following faint hoof marks, he suddenly stopped, staring. Caught on one of the spines was a tiny flag of yellow hair from a mountain lion. Since it was several inches above Jeff's head he knew no cat had left it there. Apparently it was the material of which the man's yellow vest was made.

Jeff did not like that. It brought a memory that Jeff had tried to forget. Curious, Jeff thought, that it had not occurred to him earlier. For a moment he almost turned back. Then he thought of Jimmy —he thought of Peace—and he went grimly on.

Cautiously, his pulses throbbing with the tempo of a Comanche wardrum, he skirted the brush knowing he would find the murderers. Up here, somewhere around the big spring that nestled beneath the escarpment of the high plains, he would find them.

But when he did stumble upon them he was as surprised as they.

With the scouting party two full days' march south the men had become overconfident. They had moved their camp last night after carefully obliterating all sign. Now they felt they could return at their leisure to gather more unguarded cattle, to drift them north to that spot hidden in a canyon of the Canadian River country where they would swap them to traders who would trail them west to Santa fe or Taos or over into the Territories.

Chiefly they could arrange everything so that Captain Jefferson Carson got the blame.

So they ate a leisurely breakfast. Afterwords they checked their gear. The fat man was cleaning his rifle when his partner suddenly cursed briefly and they both found themselves staring across the pool at Jeff Carson who was less than ten yards away.

The rifle was pointed directly for Jeff's stomach. No cartridge was in the receiver, but Jeff did not know that. It was a Spenser carbine, breech-loading repeater, that could cut Jeff down in seconds. Jeff thought he had blundered into a trap.

For a moment the two men were almost panicked, too. But they had lived by guns and wits so long, riding with the cavalry and later with guerilla bands in Kansas, owlhooting up and down the bloody fringe between Texan and Comanche, they were quick to take advantage of any little break.

Furthermore, they recognized Jeff—and Jeff recognized them.

"I thought you two fellers were dead," Jeff said. "Reckon that's why I was so slow to recognize your hand in this trouble."

One was Starr's brother Amos who had deserted Jeff's troop during the Battle of the Wilderness. The other was one of their former neighbors who had disappeared at the same time. Fats Brown, they called him.

Amos grinned insolently. Fats held the carbine steady.

"At least we had sense enough to quit when the quittin' was good," Amos said. "We got our brands on fifteen thousand head. They ain't worth much now but—How many's your brand on, Captain?"

"Not many," Jeff admitted.

"What are you going to do about it, Captain?" Amos asked.

"Nothing," Jeff said.

HE was watching them closely. The utter surprise of it had put a numbness into him that he could not quickly shake. He wondered if Starr had guessed the truth of this. Her brother had always had a weakness for vests of mountain lion and Texas ocelot.

Amos had come to the same question: "How's my little sister, Captain? Seen her lately?"

"I seen her," Jeff said. "Couple times. She's teachin' school. She fixed up a sort of honor roll on a shield one of the kids carved out. Got it hung in the schoolroom where all the buttons can look at it. The new Yankee colonel didn't make her take it down. Your name's on it, Amos—with a little black cross alongside."

Jeff made no effort to reach the Navy revolver in its black holster. He was still uncertain as to that carbine of Fats'. Amos seemed to be talking rather fast for a man who held all the cards.

So Jeff said: "Looks like I was follerin' the wrong party. Looking for a couple murderers."

"You ain't hintin'—" Amos started.

Jeff shook his head. "Couple of fellers who ain't got the guts to stick out a little old war ain't likely to take up murder for a living."

Deliberately he turned away, turned his back on them. He took one step down the trail from whence he had come. Then he dropped to his knees, whirling about as he did so, reaching for his cap-and-ball pistol.

Fats had not shot—but Amos had tripped up a Colt revolver and placed one slug exacty where the cross of Jeff's suspenders had been a moment ago. He lowered the weapon for a second try while Fats dropped prone, reaching for a derringer.

Fats got the derringer out and knocked Jeff flat with a ball in his shoulder. A second slug whined past Jeff. He twisted around onto his side and braced himself on an elbow. It required both hands to hold his Navy revolver—and the powder burned his fingers as he triggered. . . .

Jeff passed out half a dozen times while he dug the double grave. But he dug it deep and covered it well, tamping the earth, sprinkling sand and debris on top, even transplanting willows and toting water in his cap to make sure the plants would grow and obliterate forever this scene of sudden battle.

Then he stumbled down-train in search of Nancy—and the next thing he knew the sun was shining in his eyes and he was terribly sick. The sun was shining again, through a pane of glass that was green as the seawater off the port of Indianola. A woman's voice whispered:

"Thank God you've wakened, Jeff."

Jeff was in the little schoolhouse at the fort. He remembered how he had often heard men babbling under the influence of gunshot fever. He dreaded to think what he might have said.

"The colonel was over," she said. "That was last week. You had a few things to tell him. You caught the renegades. You never did find out their names. You couldn't remember where you buried them."

He went to sleep. When he woke he discovered that the cot had been moved closer to the window so that he would get more sun. Here he could look out at the parade grounds, or through the door to the schoolroom. In there the painted shield was still in place. None of the names had been crossed off. The black cross still stood beside Amos Guthrie's name. Outside a group of children were arguing some endless subject. They were not within his field of vision, but he could hear them. The teacher was still with him; she was always there.

One of the boys was shouting: "My Uncle Jeff's the orneriest fighter in the hull of Texas."

Jeff recognized the voice as being Jimmy's. He began to laugh. It hurt him so much he had to stop.

"When Uncle Jeff's better we're goin' to live on Pecan Creek and fight renegades," the youngster was insisting. "My Aunt Starr's goin' with us."

Jeff's mouth tightened.

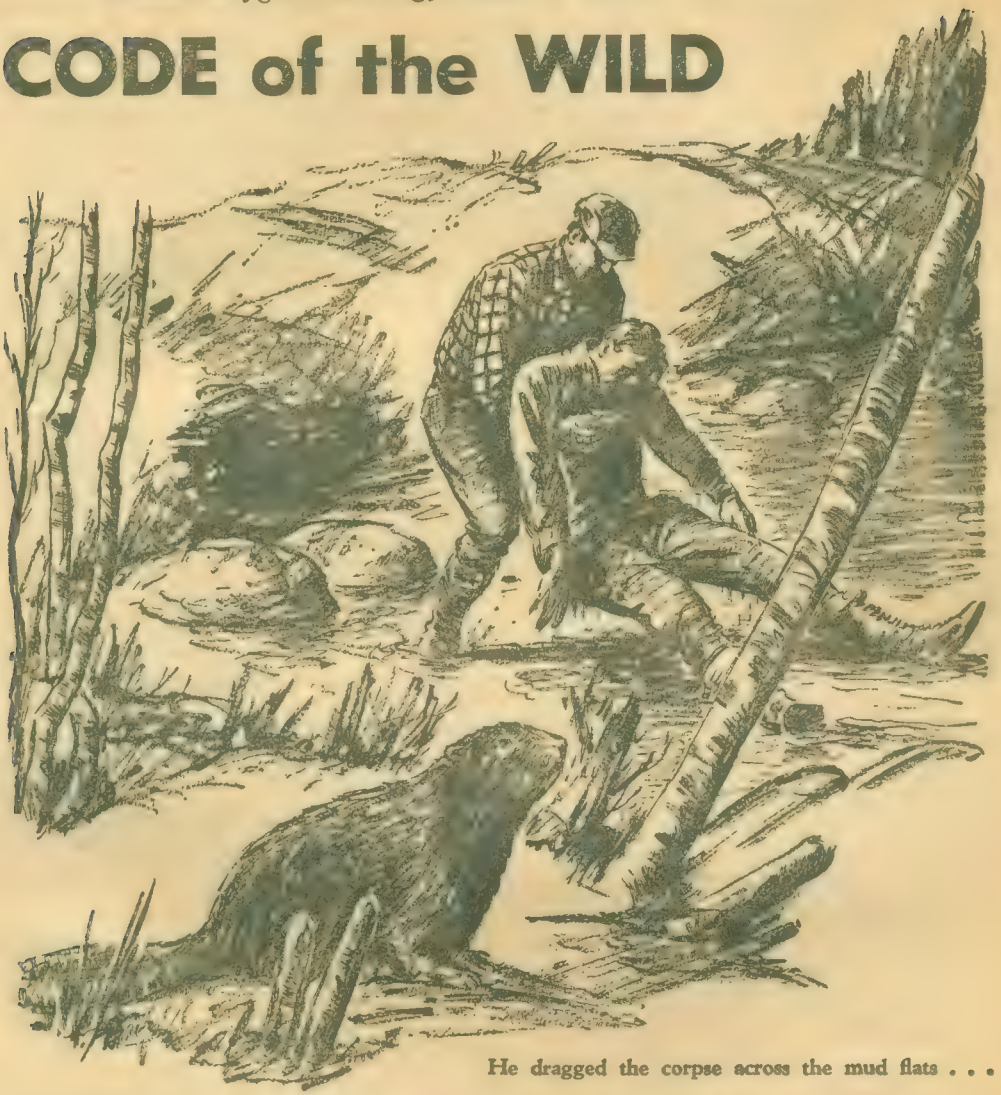
"Tell him to cut out that talk," he said shortly. "The frontier's not safe for women an' kids. It won't be for ten years. There'll be plenty of hell along the Brazos before it's safe."

"He already knows that," the girl said softly. "So do I."

And she leaned closer to kiss him.

Breed's drygulch strategy made no allowance for the . . .

CODE of the WILD



He dragged the corpse across the mud flats . . .

By TED STRATTON

TO THE trapper Breed, crouched behind a rock above the beaver pond, the entire matter was simple and logical. When Dade Warren, Park patrolman, strode up the lonely trail three miles above the macadam road curling through the wilderness. Breed would kill him.

The only witnesses would be the beavers swimming in the cold water or busy lopping off aspens on the far bank with their chisel-like teeth. Breed grinned malevolently. Simple. For a long while he had known that Dade had to die. First because Breed wanted the priceless beaver fur which it was Dade's duty to protect. Secondly, there was the aching matter of Nora Rensler.

Nora was a hill girl, like Breed, and pretty as a pink anemone swaying on slender stem. Breed had courted her for two years. He brought her trailing arbutus hidden in the dead leaves of Spiney Ridge, hand sewn gloves from sleek mink

trapped in Spring Run, and the choicest cuts of venison that had fallen to his rifle. For two years she had been his. They had "sparked it," according to the colorful language of the hill folk.

Then Dade Warren had been transferred to this lonely stretch of the extensive State park. Nora no longer waited for Breed at the summer lodge beside the lake. As fall burned riotously across the hardwood forested hills Breed knew that Nora's glances were all for the handsome Dade. Arbutus and mink gloves and venison, it seemed, had not been enough to hold her love.

Fall deepened. The nights grew chillier. Frost covered the shingle roofs of the cabins. Winter rode across the hills. Breed took to the tiny store where the hill-men gathered each evening. He sat alone in a half-barrel chair behind the pot-bellied stove—and said nothing.

A newcomer, Dade Warren, had cut him out with Nora. His cheeks blazed at the sly glances of the men, at the suppressed chuckles that greeted his entrance into the store. Still he had said nothing. He kept his hatred sealed inside.

Bitterness warped his naturally cautious instincts. Finally, hate seethed so fiercely that he decided to kill Dade. Not openly, of course. A man would be a fool to kill a rival just for the chance of sitting in the electric chair. So studying Dade's habits closely, Breed laid his plans and now lay in wait above the pond.

A huge beaver dimpled the surface and, pausing, seemed to cock an ear and listen. A flick of the broad flat tail and it disappeared toward the conical hut rearing above the water. By the dam a bickering squirrel in a scrub oak quieted. Bluejays, those alert sentinels of the woods, chattered and flew off with flashing blue wings. Quiet. . . .

Breed lifted the rifle and released the safety catch. Through the slow falling curtain of snow that had begun to sift through the bare trees, Breed glimpsed a tall man emerging up the trail. A conically peaked hat added height to his lean figure. Breasting the pond, he stood and watched the widening ripples made by the departed beaver.

Breed leveled the rifle, squinted along the sights. Holding his breath momentarily in the manner of an expert marksman, he squeezed the trigger. Breed shooting at fifty paces! Breed who could crease a squirrel's back at fifty paces. Breed shooting the man he hated.

The impact of the heavy bullet spun Dade Warren around so that he fell on his side in the shallow water. The conical hat floated on the surface. Unhurriedly Breed left the rocks and walked downhill. With a pride in his marksmanship, he noted where the bullet had entered Dade's head an inch behind the man's right ear. That was the spot Breed had aimed at—and the man was dead. His face, agonized in sudden death, managed to retain some of the inherent geniality that made him a well-liked newcomer and the beau of Nora Rensler.

Angrily Breed kicked the dead man in the stomach. "Danged well served right," he muttered. "Had no right to bust a man's life."

Breed turned away, leaving his rifle on the bank. The corpse could wait. First, he'd kill the beaver. In the nearby woods he located a ten foot oak stick, four inches through at the butt, that he had cut earlier. He walked below the dam to the trickling brook. Using the timber as a pry, Breed levered at the bottom of the key logs that formed the dam's base. Lifting and lowering the pry, he saw muddy water boil through. The brook became a freshet singing boisterously with the pull of released water.

Fifteen minutes and the pond had nearly run off downhill. From the bank Breed fired the rifle again and again into the madly swimming beavers. Absence of water brought swift danger to them. They could not live without the protection of the pond. It was a simple matter to pot them and Breed did, except for one huge beaver that dove into the cover of the deep and rushing spring that fed the pond.

Breed shrugged. "Get him later," he said.

He sloshed back and forth across the mud bottom, dragging the bodies of the thickly furred animals to the bank. The fur was nearly prime, a rich brownish-black color, the hairs long and smooth.

Snow swirled in thicker and the blizzard that had held off during the early afternoon really let go. Fine particles

stung Breed's face as he skinned the animals. Once a splashing drew his attention to the pond. The beaver had emerged from the spring's depths. It swam across a dozen feet of shallow water and reached the mud flats.

Breed snatched up the rifle. Aiming, he fired a snap shot. The thick snow obscured his aim and the beaver escaped to the woods. No matter. It did not dare leave the vicinity of the pond. Water was life's blood to a beaver.

Half the carcasses were skinned and Breed knew he had to hurry as dusk approached. He worked steadily, wielding the sharp knife with the skill of a surgeon plying a scalpel. Finally a pile of fur lay on the ground and Breed bound them into a bale with a stout cord.

Across the emptied pond a tree crashed. Breed looked up. The further bank was blanketed by the falling snow, but Breed knew that the beaver was going about his accustomed work. Killing that beaver would be one of his last jobs. He disposed of the bloody carcasses by dropping them into a deep rock crevice and covering the opening with timber and heavy stones. Snow would cover everything, including his tracks. The snow had been a lucky break he had not counted on.

Three things remained for Breed to do. Dispose of the corpse, release the pry that held the dam above the bottom and kill the beaver. He decided to do the things in that order. He dragged the corpse across the mud flats to the beaver house which, normally six feet under water, now stood in a few inches of it. A two foot wide hole was in the lower side of the house and the beavers used this hole to enter and leave. It was Breed's intention to hide the corpse within the hut and reflood the pond. Who would think to look for Dade there?

Smart, that's what the plan was. Carefully Breed knelt and shoved the body into the hole. He cursed at the icy touch of the water. Still the job had to be done and inch by inch, he stuffed the body into the house until only the lower legs remained. The body refused to move further. Breed alternately shoved and cursed. The body was stuck.

Avoiding the spring that was rushing past only a yard away, Breed planted his feet firmly so that he bestrode the corpse. He grasped the soles of the hobnailed boots, gathered his strength. With a sudden dexterious motion, he heaved mightily. The legs disappeared.

The ease with which the body had come loose flung Breed off balance. He staggered against the hut, caromed off. To save himself from falling into the shallow water he whirled in an attempt to leap across the spring to firmer footing. He would have made it easily except for a stick imbedded in the spongy mud. His right boot tripped on the stick, his left leg poised over the spring, then plunged downward until it was buried in water to the knee. Breed fell headlong. He came up mouthing icy water and curses. The unexpected movement had twisted the left leg and a sharp pain shot clear to his hips.

◇ ◇ ◇

HE REGAINED his balance and planting the right foot on firmer bottom, tried to lift the other leg. The boot would not come free. What had happened? He realized that the left foot was wedged in a rock crevice at the bottom of the spring. The spring had its origin in a rock strata beneath the accumulation of mud. Evidently the action of the water boiling upward had widened the crevice sufficiently to trap his foot. Anyway his foot was fast.

For a moment Breed became panicky. His many years of woods training restored his senses. Keep calm, he reas-

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oned, there was no danger. Slowly he wriggled the leg in an effort to free the boot from the trap. But the boot was jammed too tightly for the stratagem to work. Besides the strain of the wrenched leg was unbearable whenever he shifted position. He realized that he would have to cut the laces on the knee-high boot.

Breed straightened as well as he could. He reached under his heavy sheepskin-lined coat and fumbled at the sheath where he carried his hunting knife. The knife was gone. Then he remembered. There had been three things for him to do when he had last stood on the bank. Hide the corpse, lift the pry and kill the beaver. In his hurry to finish the job Breed had left his knife on the bank where he intended to skin the beaver.

Already his left leg and hands were numb with cold. The sun had set and darkness began to drop over the pond. The thickly falling snow prickled his hot, perspiring face. Somewhere near the dam the beaver splashed in the water.

Nothing remained but for Breed to unlace the boot, a slow, tedious task at best and made more difficult because the boot was submerged in muddy, icy water. Holding his breath, Breed thrust both hands under. Slowly and clumsily he untied the double knot. The laces came out of the eyelets easily as he pulled because the water had not had time to freeze them fast.

By now his hands were numb with cold and Breed withdrew them from the water and thrust them into the coat pockets to warm. A few minutes and they were warm enough for him to proceed. A lace jammed in an eyelet. Breed tugged desperately. The lace would not budge.

When Breed had arisen that morning, he had been late. As he laced his high boots one of the buckskin thongs had worn through. He should have replaced it, but in his eagerness to kill Dade Warren, he had simply tied the broken ends together and finished lacing the boot. It was this knot that refused to go through the narrower eyelet.

Breed stood as erect as his cramped leg would permit and searched his pockets for a piece of metal that would serve as a knife. He found an empty cartridge. The rim was not very sharp, still it would have to do. He began to saw on the lace below the knot. This would take longer, but there was no alternative. Methodically he worked, pausing now and then to thaw out his hands. His fingers stiffened. It was not easy to hold the cartridge under water and cut the lace. The inevitable happened. The cartridge slipped and was gone.

Cursing angrily, Breed searched in the mud for the vital bit of metal that he needed to win his freedom quickly. The spongy mud frustrated his efforts.

According to a hasty calculation, he had been imprisoned nearly two hours. He wondered if he would be able to last out the night.

On one end of the chain suspended from his watch was a small key. Breed took out the watch, grasped the key firmly and used it to pry at the knot. For a half hour he worked slowly and carefully, refusing to let his mind ponder the predicament he was in. He sensed finally that the knot was loosening. In a few moments it would come free entirely and he could finish unlacing the boot and escape.

With an exclamation, Breed straightened. His mind shouted a new danger. He strained his ears in the darkness. Some sound that his ears had become accustomed to was missing. The short hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Then he knew.

The water chuckling under the lifted dam had stopped. Dazed, Breed bent and measured the depth of the water in which he stood. It now came nearly to his shoulder as he reached down to touch bottom. And his left knee—the water was now an inch above it. As the full impact of what was happening drove itself home to his mind, Breed jerked upward. Again and again his wild cries rang out in the desolate wilderness and he struggled like a man gone insane. . . .

Three days later a searching party came up the trail seeking Dade Warren. Caught in the thin ice sheeting the pond's surface they spotted the black hair of Breed, the trapper, drowned when the beaver, responding to the instincts of thousands of years, had repaired the dam and reflooded the pond.

CACTUS COUNTRY CAVALIER

The bottle cracked down on his head . . .

By BILL GULICK

★

Juan greatly preferred hunting outlaws to working on the railroad—until a genial owlhooter took Juan's horse, gun and his last bottle of tequila.

★

THE morning sun, an hour high in the east, was smiling benignly down on the rolling hills of the peaceful Tres Rios country. White-faced cattle grazed along the stream banks, lizards sunned themselves on flat-topped rocks and buzzards circled the cloudless sky in search of breakfast. Every living creature was up and about.

Except one.

In an adobe hut halfway up a cactus-covered hillside, Juan Ibanez turned over

in bed as the sun struck his eyes and uttered a long sigh, then continued with his interrupted dream. It was a pleasant dream—in which he was lying in a hammock in the shade of a tall tree while a beautiful senorita sang softly to him and kept his glass filled with *tequila*. A cool breeze rocked the hammock gently.

Then came the earthquake.

Juan woke up to find himself sitting in the middle of the floor, cold water streaming down over his head. "Get up, you lazy good-for-nothing!" a sharp voice scolded. "Do you think you can sleep all day?"

Juan squinted reproachfully at the dark-eyed girl who was leaning in the open window, an empty clay pitcher in her hand. He sighed and murmured, "No, Rosita. But I could try."

Rosita's eyes flashed angrily. "Have you forgotten your promise? Do you not remember that this is the day you start to work for the railroad? Do you want to be fired for being late?"

Juan brightened. "Would they fire me for being late?"

"I will see to it that you are not late. Get up. I am coming in."

Rosita's face disappeared from the window and Juan struggled to his feet. Slipping on his boots, he was completely dressed. He crossed the room and looked at his reflection in the cracked mirror above the wobbly dresser. Should he put on a clean shirt? he wondered. What was today? Monday? Thursday?

He shrugged. He did not need a clean shirt. It was not yet September.

He ran his tongue across his lips. His mouth felt dry and leathery. Suddenly he noticed the half empty bottle of *tequila* on the dresser and his eyes lighted. *"Ay!"* he exclaimed. "A little one is just what I need!" and uncorked the bottle.

He was just lifting it to his lips when quick steps sounded behind him and Rosita jerked the bottle from his hand.

"Drunkard! Dishonest one! Robber of the blind! Do you ever think of anything but drinking and sleeping?"

Juan gazed meekly down at his boot tips. "I was hungry," he muttered.

Rosita's pert little nose wrinkled in disgust. She went to the window and threw the bottle out, being careful to first pour its contents on the ground. Juan sighed and went out to the stable to saddle Diablo.

Why, he wondered, had he ever let Rosita talk him into going to work? He loved Rosita, of course, and wanted to marry her, but was that any reason why she should make him promise to go to work? *Por Dios,* that was carrying love too far!

Diablo was stamping restlessly about in his stall. He was a bony, awkward looking horse, dirty gray in color and sour of disposition. But Juan loved him, and, in his own peculiar way, Diablo loved Juan. They had much in common.

"Good morning, my little dove," Juan said. "Did Rosita get you up, too?"

Diablo shook his head and nickered angrily. He was nosing at something in the hay on the floor; coming nearer, Juan saw that it was a bottle of *tequila*. Diablo was trying to pull the cork with his teeth.

Juan seized the bottle and held it up to the light. It was a fourth full—just enough, he thought, for a little pick-you-up for himself and Diablo.

They both felt better after they had disposed of the contents of the bottle. Saddling Diablo, Juan led him out into the corral. Rosita was standing just outside the fence, looking suspicious.

"What took you so long?" she demanded.

"Diablo was sleepy," Juan answered. "He is not used to getting up so early."

Rosita cast a scornful glance at the horse and said, "He is a lazy one, too." She handed Juan a basket. "Here is something to eat for lunch. You must hurry now or you will be late."

Juan took the basket and mounted. He looked wistfully toward the adobe hut and thought of the beautiful dream which had been so rudely interrupted. "Rosita," he pleaded, "do I have to—"

Rosita stamped her foot in exasperation. "Never have I seen such a good-for-nothing-but-coyote-bait one! Why are you not ambitious like *Señor* Roberto? Now, go, go, go!"

"Si," Juan said dully, touching Diablo with his spurs. "I go, my little chicken."

"Be sure you do not stop at the How Many Saloon."

"Si."

"And be sure you do not—"

"*Si.*"

Rosita's scolding voice at last faded behind and Juan sank into the bitterness of his reflections. Rosita was always holding *Señor* Roberto de Alvarez up as an example for him. *Señor* Roberto owned a big ranch and the bank in Tres Rios—he was rich, in fact. Juan wondered how it would feel to be rich.

If you were rich, he mused, you would not have to work. But *Señor* Roberto worked all the time. Juan scowled as he tried to understand this. Was *Señor* Roberto rich because he worked all the time? Or did he work all the time because he was rich?

"*Por Dios!*" he muttered. "One cannot win."

He shrugged and reached into a saddlebag, smiling as his hand touched a *tequila* bottle. Uncorking it, he drank long and deep, then tossed the empty bottle away with a wistful frown. Why was it all his bottles had only one drink left in them?

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THE railroad crew was working this morning on the right of way a couple of miles beyond Tres Rios, making it necessary for Juan to ride through town. He eyed Main street curiously as he jogged along, for never before had he been in town so early in the morning. He was amazed to find so many people stirring.

Diablo's steps slowed hopefully as he drew even with the How Many Saloon, but Juan kicked him in the ribs. "We promised Rosita we would not stop," he said firmly. "Besides, it is not yet open."

A gaunt, middle-aged man with a bristling gray handlebar mustache was sitting on a bench in front of the jail, whittling. When he saw Juan, he dropped his knife in surprise.

"What're you doin' up at this time of day?" he called out.

Juan straightened in the saddle. "I am going to work."

Sheriff Hoss Perkins stood up and squinted suspiciously at him, scowling. "Guess my hearin' is gettin' bad," he grunted. "Sounded to me like you just said you was goin' to work. That right?"

"I am. On the railroad."

Hoss Perkins shook his head sadly. "You're drunker than I thought you was. Better go home an' sleep it off 'fore I have to throw you in jail—agin."

Juan did not pause to argue. He did not blame Hoss Perkins for not believing him.

The section foreman was a big, red-faced Irishman by the name of Mike O'Rourke. He wrote out a time card for Juan and told him to report to the track-laying crew. Juan put the card in his shirt pocket, took a deep breath and hitched up his heavy cartridge belt. O'Rourke looked apprehensively at the gun on his hip.

"What's the artillery for?"

Juan scowled. "The which?"

"The hogleg. The gun. What're you carryin' it for?"

"Because it is mine. Should I carry somebody else's gun?"

O'Rourke shrugged wearily. "Okay. Go ahead and pack it. But it won't help you build no railroad."

During the course of the morning, Juan worked at several different jobs. He did not like any of them, and told O'Rourke so. The foreman stared at him in exasperation, then finally said scathingly, "So you don't like carrying water or unloading ballast or stacking ties, huh? Well, I'll give you an easy job. Do you know what a sledge is?"

Juan did not, but he nodded absently. O'Rourke took him by the arm and led him to a spot where a crew was laying rails. Thrusting a heavy sledge into his hands, he snapped, "Get to work drivin' spikes."

Juan hefted the sledge experimentally, wondering why it had to be so heavy. A small, meek-eyed man named Ramon placed a spike in the tie and looked up at Juan as he held it there.

"Are you sure you can hit it?"

Juan's pride was hurt. Couldn't he drive a nail with a pistol bullet at twenty paces? He lifted the sledge far over his head and swung it around in a small circle, eyeing the head of the spike. "But of course I can hit it," he said. "I think."

Ramon's brown face grew a shade whiter but he closed his eyes and kept

a firm grip on the spike. Juan took careful aim, started to swing.

Suddenly there was a disturbance a short distance up the right of way and Juan looked around. Two mounted men, whom Juan recognized as Sheriff Hoss Perkins and *Señor* Roberto de Alvarez, had come up and were talking excitedly with Mike O'Rourke. Juan laid down the sledge.

"Do not go away," he told Ramon. "I will be back."

"You need not hurry," Ramon said.

A crowd of curious workers had gathered around *Señor* Roberto and Sheriff Perkins by the time Juan came up. He inquired what the excitement was all about.

"The bank has been robbed," somebody told him. "The payroll money for the railroad crew has been stolen."

Juan scowled. If they did not pay him, he would not work. *Señor* Roberto seemed very flustered. He was a slim, swarthy man with a dandified black mustache. Juan never had liked him.

Mike O'Rourke questioned *Señor* Roberto. "You say this fella took the money right out from under your nose?"

Señor Roberto made a helpless gesture with his shoulders. "*Si.* We were just getting ready to leave the bank. He put a gun in my ribs and said give him the money or else."

"Or else what?" Juan inquired.

Señor Roberto turned and gazed at him scornfully. "I did not ask him."

"Who was he?"

"I do not know. He was tall and skinny with a face like a hatchet."

Sheriff Perkins broke in impatiently. "This talk ain't gettin' us nowhere. Best we can figure, he come this way. I'm organizin' a posse. Any of your men want to come along, O'Rourke?"

Juan stepped forward. Chasing a bank robber would be less like work than swinging a sledge. "I will go," he said. "I will catch this bank robber."

"You could not catch a fat turtle," *Señor* Roberto declared scornfully.

Juan put a hand on his gun butt and muttered something under his breath.

O'Rourke said, "Go ahead. You're not doin' any good here. Take all the men you want, Perkins."

IN A FEW minutes the posse was organized. Only three workers besides Juan had horses. These three, with Juan, *Señor* Roberto and Hoss Perkins, set out at a gallop in the direction the fleeing bank robber was thought to have taken. At first, Juan enjoyed the ride. This was much better than building a railroad. But as the morning fled with no excitement nor sign of the outlaw, he grew a trifle bored.

At the edge of the badlands a dozen miles west of Tres Rios, Hoss Perkins reined up. All the horses, with the exception of Diablo, were worn out from the long ride in the hot sun. Diablo looked no worse, and no better, than usual.

"Guess we'll have to go back an' git fresh hosses," Perkins said.

"But the bank robber," *Señor* Roberto protested, "he will get away with all my money."

"Maybe so. But we cain't chase him on foot."

Juan rolled a cigarette and said confidently, "Diablo and me will catch him by myself."

"You!" *Señor* Roberto snorted. "You would hide in a prairie dog hole if you saw a robber."

"I will catch him," Juan repeated stolidly.

Senor Roberto's lips curled. "So, you will catch him. I will give you five hundred dollars if you do."

Licking the cigarette, Juan paused. "In silver dollars?"

"In nickels, if you want it that way."

"*Bueno.* It is the deal." He kicked Diablo into a trot. "I will bring this robber in before the sun goes down."

The posse headed back for town and Juan rode alone into the badlands. To his left, a deep, swift-flowing stream tumbled along a steep-walled gorge and for a while he considered crossing it, but finding no passable ford decided to continue along the rimrock on the north side of the stream. He wondered which way the bandit had gone. Which way would he go if he were a bandit?

The afternoon sun was very hot and Juan grew sleepy. Rounding a turn in the canyon rim, he found an outcropping of rock which offered a pleasant shade. The thing to do, he mused, was to sit

down and think this deep problem out.

He dismounted and took the lunch Rosita had packed for him from the basket and munched it slowly as he sat in the shade. He tried hard to concentrate on what he would do if he were a bandit but his thoughts kept wandering. If only he had a small drink of *tequila,* he reflected, he could think better.

Diablo, who had been turned loose to forage for himself, suddenly let out a nicker of delight. Juan turned his head and stared curiously. Diablo was nosing around in a small thicket a short distance away and had evidently found something of interest. In his mouth he held a slim, paper wrapped object.

Juan got to his feet and went to investigate. Diablo placed the paper wrapped object in his hand and smirked with a "look-what-I-found" expression.

"Por Dios!" Juan exclaimed. "A bottle!"

He tore the paper away, hardly bothering to notice that it had a picture of a man and some printed matter on it. His eyes lighted when he had unwrapped the bottle—it was full to the top of *tequila.*

Looking around, Juan noticed that there were signs of a camp in the thicket—a dead fire, a few empty tin cans. He shrugged and turned his attention to opening the bottle.

"Someone has made camp here," he told Diablo as he pulled the cork, "and forgot this bottle. But it is keepers finders, no? Should we look a giving horse in the teeth?"

Diablo snorted and cocked a speculative eye at the bottle.

Juan filled his sombrero half full of water, poured in a liberal shot of *tequila,* and let Diablo have the first drink. Then while the horse was still smacking his lips, he sat down in the shade and took a small nip for himself.

It made him feel much better. He yawned and wondered sleepily why he should bother to chase bank robbers.

Suddenly he heard a noise from the direction of the river and a man on foot came in sight around the bend of the canyon. The man was slim and tall and thin faced. He was carrying a pair of saddle-

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STAR WESTERN

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bags and his clothes were dripping wet. When he saw Juan he halted in surprise.

"What're you doin' here?" he grunted.

Juan smiled and waved the *tequila* bottle. "I am chasing a bandit. Sit down and have a little one with me."

The stranger looked at him closely for a moment, then came forward and hunkered down beside him and took the bottle. "Don't mind if I do," he said.

Juan inspected his dripping clothes curiously. "You are all wet," he observed.

The stranger stared at him, scowling. "Yeah. My horse drowned when I was swimmin' the river. Lost my pack and gun—lost everything but these saddle bags."

"That is too bad," Juan sympathized. "Were you going someplace?"

"Just driftin'. Come from out Arizona way."

"Do you punch cows?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that's it—I'm a cowpuncher. Name is Smith. John Smith."

"Glad to know you. My name is Juan, too. Have another drink."

Suddenly Diablo, who had been standing by watching the stranger suspiciously, thrust his muzzle over Juan's shoulder and seized the bottle. The stranger jumped in surprise. "What in tarnation—"

Juan laughed pleasantly. "Diablo is afraid we will drink it all. Here, my little butterfly, I will pour you another small one."

John Smith stood watching silently while Diablo sipped at the pick-you-up. After a moment, he said, "Quite a horse. How'd you like to sell him?"

"Por dios!" Juan exclaimed. "I would never sell Diablo."

"Give you a hundred bucks for him."

"No."

"Five hundred."

"He is not for sale. Have another drink."

John Smith shrugged and took another sip out of the bottle. Juan was feeling pleasantly comfortable now. This was much better than working on the railroad, he mused. Idly, he toyed with the idea of making bandit-chasing a life-time job.

The bottle of *tequila* disappeared surprisingly fast. John Smith seemed to be a pleasant fellow; Juan liked him particularly because he did not drink much *tequila,* leaving that much more for Juan and Diablo. When the bottle was at last empty, Juan sighed and stood up.

"I must be going," he said.

Smith also stood up. "Don't need to hurry off."

"I must catch the bandit before dark. I promised *Señor* Roberto."

He was preparing to mount Diablo when John Smith tapped him on the shoulder. The thin-faced cowpuncher had a strange look on his face. "I'll give you a thousand dollars for that nag," he said desperately.

Juan scowled and laid a hand on the butt of his gun. He did not like the stranger's persistence. *"Por Dios!"* he snapped, "I told you Diablo was not for sale!"

Smith looked apprehensively at the gun and backed off. "No offense," he muttered. He picked up the empty bottle and held it up to the sun. "Say," he exclaimed, "there's another drink left here."

"Is there?" Juan moved closer to inspect the bottle.

Suddenly Smith wheeled and raised the bottle high over his head. Juan stumbled backward, clawing for his gun. He did not move quite fast enough. He saw the bottle descend, felt a crushing blow on his head, then knew no more. . . .

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THE sun hung low on the western horizon when Juan regained consciousness. He groaned and touched his throbbing head, trying to recall what had happened. The stranger, the bottle. . . . But how his head hurt!

He managed to stagger to his feet and look around. The canyon was empty. The stranger was gone, Diablo was gone. Juan felt for his gun. He groaned. It was gone, too.

The empty *tequila* bottle lay nearby. Juan picked it up, stared at it wistfully for a moment, then tossed it aside. His eye caught the piece of paper which had been wrapped around the bottle. He uncrumpled it. It was a reward poster. The picture upon it looked strikingly like that of John Smith. Except that the poster called this man Hatchet-Face Duncan. It

said that he was worth five hundred dollars in Arizona, dead or alive.

Juan cursed long and bitterly. John Smith was not John Smith at all. He was Hatchet-Face Duncan, and he was the man who had robbed the Tres Rios bank.

Juan felt very discouraged and heartsick as he started afoot down the long trail back to Tres Rios. He had lost his chance to get the reward money *Señor* Roberto had offered. All of Tres Rios would be laughing at him when they learned what had happened. Worst of all, he would have to go back to work on the railroad to earn enough money to buy another horse.

Juan sighed. He could not understand why Diablo had deserted him. Never had Diablo let any other living soul ride him.

The rocks across which Juan walked were sharp and rough and before he had gone two miles his feet were blistered and he had to sit down and rest. Suddenly, far off to the east, he saw a small cloud of dust rising from the plain. Standing up, he shaded his eyes and stared.

Por Dios! It was Diablo!

He was coming at a dead run, galloping along like an ungainly, overgrown jackrabbit. His saddle was empty. Behind him, another and larger cloud of dust showed, as if he were being chased.

In a few moments Diablo slid to a stop in front of Juan. He was very drunk. He was so drunk that he weaved from side to side like a ship in a heavy sea and his eyes rolled in their sockets. Lurching closer, he dropped an unopened bottle of *tequila* which he had been carrying in his mouth into Juan's hands.

Juan knew he should scold Diablo but he could not force himself to do it. He felt deeply touched. He scratched Diablo's ears and murmured affectionately, "My little pet, I knew you would not forget me. But where did you get this bottle? And what did you do with Senor John Smith Hatchet-Face Duncan?"

Diablo shook his head, snorted, and leered expectantly at the bottle.

The riders who had been following Diablo were drawing close now and Juan recognized Sheriff Hoss Perkins, *Señor* Roberto de Alvarez, and Rosita. Prudent-

THREE GO BACK!

By J. Leslie Mitchell

A sky monster, lapis and azure-blue, it sailed out of the heat-haze that all morning had been drifting westward from the Bay of Biscay. It startled the crew of the Rio tramp and there was a momentary scurry of grimy off-watches reaching the deck, and a great upward gape of astounded eyes. Then the second engineer, a knowledgeable man, voiced explanations.

"It'll be the airship *Magellan's Cloud* on her return voyage."

The Third spat, not disparagingly, but because the fumes of the engine-room were still in his throat. "Where to?"

"Man, you're unco' ignorant. Noo York. She's been lying off for weather at Paris nearly a week, Sparks says."

A subdued buzz and crackle. A tapping that presently ceased. High up against a cloudless sky, the airship quivered remoter in the Atlantic sunshine.

The Rio tramp chugged northeastward. One or two of the crew still stood on deck, watching the aerial voyageur blend with the August sunhaze and the bubble walls of seascape till it disappeared.

And that was the last the world ever saw of the airship *Magellan's Cloud*.

They died, most of them, but three survived—survived to live in another age and another unknown land to write the history of civilization twenty million years before it happened—and show their *ancestors* the hope of a better world!

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ly, he slipped the bottle into a back pocket and hoped Rosita would not notice it.

Rosita tumbled off her horse, rushed up to Juan and threw her arms around him. She kissed him soundly on the lips. "Oh, Juanito—you are so wonderful, so brave! I am so glad you are not dead!"

Juan said that he, too, was glad he was not dead. But secretly he wondered why Rosita should be so excited and so pleased to see him.

Hoss Perkins smiled and shook his head in admiration. "I shore got to give you credit, Juan, you got a head on your shoulders."

Juan touched his aching head tenderly. "*Si,*" he murmured. "But it feels like it is coming off."

"Yes, sir," Perkins continued, "that was the smartest scheme I ever heard of for catchin' a robber. Lettin' him have Diablo was just like puttin' a noose around his neck. But how in tarnation did you know Diablo would come bustin' hell-for-leather into the How Many Saloon?"

Juan cast a glance out of the corner of his eye at Diablo.

"It's just a little trick I have taught him. He is one very smart horse."

"And you are smart, too," Rosita said proudly.

"I didn't think you had it in you," *Señor* Roberto said with reluctance.

Hoss Perkins laughed and slapped his thigh. "By the Great Jehosophat, Tres Rios ain't never seen nothin' like it! Why that Diablo hoss come tearin' into town so fast that Hatchet-Face Duncan couldn't have got off iff'n he'd tried. First thing Hatchet-Face knew, Diablo was inside the How Many snortin' an' stompin' an' tryin' to get back behind the bar where the liquor stock was.

"The bartender got so excited he called me, an' when I got there Diablo had Hatchet-Face backed up in a corner scared ten shades whiter'n a boiled shirt. He confessed everything 'fore I even knew who he was."

Diablo was still weaving uncertainly back and forth. He leaned against Juan for support and Juan put an arm around his neck. Juan did not think it necessary to tell the sheriff that Diablo had probably been interested more in making somebody buy him a drink than in catching bank robbers.

Senor Roberto leaned down and handed Juan a heavy bag. "Here is the reward I promised," he said grudgingly. "Five hundred dollars. In silver."

Juan looked at Rosita and beamed. He would have plenty of *tequila* to drink now. She smiled back at him, then reached out and took the bag. "I will keep this for you," she said sweetly. "And when the other five hundred comes from Arizona, I will keep it, too. We will spend it for something useful. A plough, maybe. Or a windmill."

Juan could not see anything useful about these things. What good was a plough without somebody to run it? He wondered if Rosita knew how to plough. What did he want with a windmill when all he had to do was go down to the river when he wanted a drink of water—when he drank water.

His spirits fell for a moment, then he shrugged and smiled. Why should he be unhappy? Diablo had come back to him. Rosita was proud of him. And in his pocket he had a full bottle of *tequila.*

"Well," Hoss Perkins said, "guess we better be headin' back for town."

"*Si,*" Juan said, and turned to mount Diablo.

Suddenly Rosita touched his arm and said meekly, "Juan."

He paused. "*Si,* my little potato?"

"I would like to kiss you, Juan."

Juan was surprised. But he let her kiss him. She put her arms around him and kissed him for a long time. It was very pleasant. At last she removed her arms from around his waist, smiled and said, "We must not keep them waiting any longer."

Juan mounted and kicked Diablo in the ribs. He felt very happy. Was there ever a girl as sweet as Rosita? Had she not kissed him long and clingingly? Suddenly a premonition seized him. He reached a hand to the back pocket where he had put the bottle of *tequila.* He said a bitter curse:

"*Por Dios,* I have been robbed!

Diablo cocked a sardonic eye up at him and hicupped his disgust for a man who would be such a fool as to trust a woman.

SHERIFF'S FREEZE-OUT

By

RYERSON JOHNSON

A lawman must prove the innocence of a suspected killer—or take in his best friend to hang!

FOR maybe the twenty-fifth time that night, Sheriff Het Harrison got down patiently from his horse and scanned the black rock for sign of Tommy Clay's passing.

He thought, "Tommy's covered his trail so well that if I lost it, who would know? . . . Nobody!"

But he sighed and climbed wearily back in saddle. And because he was an honest man, and for forty years had been pledged to enforce the law of Malpai County without fear or favor, he went on, under the desert stars, following the tracks where they led.

Peace-officering on this trail was a blighting business. Damn it, he *liked* young Clay. Everybody did. In the three months since the younker had hazed in from Texas, with a grin on his homely face and a determination to hit pay dirt in lonesome Bent Creek basin, he'd made friends on all sides. Even cantankerous old Pop Lathrington had cottoned to the boy.

"Sometimes," the sheriff brooded, "it seems the longer I live, the less I know about human nature. I jus' never would of thought this grinnin' Texas kid would done it."

Morning was a gray smudge on the desert rim when the sheriff reached Tommy Clay's remote shack on Bent Creek. Tommy was already up and stirring. His lamplight put a yellow swath through the window. The sheriff lifted the latch and went in without knocking.

Tommy Clay was frying potatoes on the sheet-iron stove. A big gangling kid, he heeled around and brushed touseled hair from his eyes and looked at the sheriff with what seemed to be pleased surprise.

In that instant Tommy made his play . . .

★ ★ ★

"Just in time for breakfast, you old trail dog," he greeted. "What you doin' so far so early?"

The sheriff thought moodily, "He sure don't act guilty. . . . But then, he'd *have* to act this way. This ain't somethin' he's figgered to run away from."

He tried to think how he'd planned to start the questioning, but all he could think of at the moment was how tired he felt—how very tired and old. He couldn't miss a whole night's sleep any more without noticing it. It slowed up both his hand and his brain.

He said, holding his voice dead and flat, "You've been seein' a lot of old Pop Lathrington lately, ain't you, Tommy?"

Tommy said, "Sure," and grinned. "He's my nearest neighbor up the crick, and he ain't such a bad old cuss when you get to know him. Barks worse'n he bites. He ain't well—"

"When you left Pop's yesterday right after the rain, why'd you start to town, then turn your horse off on hard rock and

backtrack to here, meanderin' all over hell's acres—all the time on hard rock to hide your tracks?"

"Hell, I wasn't hidin' my tracks. That quartz outcrop that lays across the trail—I always intentioned sometime followin' it out. It looked so bright and invitin' after the rain—so I followed it. But I think everybody's right when they say there's no gold in that ledge."

"That's your alibi, huh?"

"My what? Hey, what's this ride about—"

"You wantin' to hear me say it? All right; Pop's layin' dead in his shack with a bullet hole through his head."

"No!" Tommy said. "No!" Then, "They blamin' me?"

Genuine shock had seemed to be the first reaction, the sheriff observed. The rest had seemed to be a confused afterthought. No, Tommy sure didn't act guilty. . . . But this was the way he'd have to play it out if he *was* guilty.

He said, "The tracks show you were the last one to see him, Tommy. You left right after the rain. The doc estimates that's about the time Lathrington got it."

"Why—why that don't prove nothin'." The friendly eager light had gone from Tommy Clay's eyes. He appeared dazed. "Why—why would I want to kill him? Pop was my friend."

"That's what the note said," Sheriff Harrison remarked dryly. With the fingers of his left hand he pinched out the piece of folded paper from behind the tobacco sack in his shirt pocket.

He handed the note to Tommy Clay. Tommy read it. In crooked, hand-printed letters the note said:

I DUN THIS BY MY OWN HAN, LEEVIN ALL MY SAVINGS AN PROPTY TO TOMMY CLAY WHO WAS MY FREND.

"Why the poor old codger," Tommy blurted. "The poor old—" Then he became aware of the way the sheriff was looking at him, and he noticed how the sheriff's thumb was hooked in his belt so that his hand was within easy grab-reach of his gun. He moved forward a step and said harshly, "I don't get your drift, Het. The note tells plain it was suicide."

"HIM knowin' you only such a short time," the sheriff said, still in that dead flat tone, "don't it look a mite peculiar that he'd leave you all his savins' and property, which are considerable?"

"Why yeah—yeah, it does. But he didn't have no relations. And he was kind of soured on folks around here. I come in new, and I spent a lot of time with him. He got to kind of likin' me, I reckon."

"You think that story will stick with the judge and jury, Tommy?"

"Huh? You mean you actually believe — Why, hell, Pop had every reason to commit suicide, if ever a man did. A disease the docs can't touch—in pain most of the time—not long to live anyway—His note lets me plumb out!"

"Contrarily, Tommy," the sheriff said gently, "it's what's like to hang you."

"How?" Tommy demanded hoarsely.

"All you've been seein' of Pop Lathrington lately, it's right curious you didn't know. *Pop can't write even his own name. He's what they call illiterate.*" The sheriff drew his gun.

Tommy Clay's glance, in desperation, swept to his own holstered sixgun hanging from its peg on the wall.

"Don't try it, Tommy," Sheriff Harrison warned.

"Listen," Tommy said. "Hell's fire, I know Pop couldn't write. You ain't tellin' me nothin'. That's what I been seein' him so much about. He wanted me to teach him to write, and I did."

"You'll have to think faster'n that for the jury, Tommy."

"I'm talkin' true!" Tommy Clay said, seeming to pour out his heart and his soul with the words. "Pop—he knew he was goin' to have to die soon anyway, and he didn't want it said he died illiterate. It was preyin' on his mind somethin' fierce. But I didn't know all the time I was teachin' him, that it was so's he could write a suicide note."

"Can you prove any of that?"

"How could I?" Tommy Clay asked. "You know I can't."

"Then the law says I've got to take you in, Tommy. My duty—"

The sheriff stopped. Sometimes that word came near to gagging him. Duty

could be an all-fired soulless thing at times. He felt woefully tired again. That all-night ride, out of saddle and into saddle, out and in—all night.

That lamp—the flame in that naked lamp globe. It bit at his eyes the way the sleep-weariness punished his body. He blinked to ease the smarting, and lifted his left hand to rub.

And in that instant Tommy made his play. Already within reaching distance, his hand lifted with the speed of a rattler striking. Tommy was young, his strength and his reflexes in their prime. His hand gripped the gun barrel, thrusting it aside.

The gun roared, filling the little room with its bludgeoning echoes. But echoes never hurt anyone; and the bullet pludded harmlessly into the wall. Tommy twisted the gun barrel, and his free hand struck out, savagely. The sheriff caved backwards, striking against the table and bringing up against the wall—and Tommy Clay had the gun.

He gripped the gun for shooting, and moved in, fiercely exultant, lining on the sheriff.

Helpless under that gun, Het Harrison jabbed, "Don't do it, boy! Think first. Cool down. Don't be doin' somethin' you'll be sorry for all your life."

"At least I'd have a life to be sorry in," Tommy slashed back at him.

But the sheriff's shouted warning had the effect of jerking Tommy Clay out of his blind destroying passion. If he killed now it would be from conviction, not rage.

"You'd never get away, boy," the sheriff reminded. "They'd track you down."

"Not if they didn't know I'd killed you, they wouldn't."

"They'd know, boy—"

"How would they?" Tommy cut in bleakly. "If I sunk your body in a mine shaft and buried it?"

The clock on the shelf above the stove ticked like a single-jack whacking on granite, as the seconds drew out, and neither man said anything, nor made any move. Tommy kept the sixgun leveled on Sheriff Harrison. Tommy's lips were white, and they trembled. But his gun hand was reasonably firm. His finger on the trigger slowly started squeezing.

Then at the last instant the air burst from his lungs in a sob. He lifted the gun and threw it as hard as he could across the room. It struck the wall, fell to the floor with a clatter.

He stared blankly at the sheriff, then from the depths of his misery, he found words. "I couldn't do it. I—you win. But I hope you swing in hell before you get a chance to jail another man with no more proof than what you've got on me."

On Het Harrison's tired face was a smile of gentle triumph. "Proof?" he questioned softly. "Why you've jus' give me a whole world of proof, son."

Tommy Clay looked at him strangely. "I've what?"

"Sure. When you throwed that gun away. You didn't have it in your heart to kill me, so I don't reckon you killed Pop Lathrington either."

"You mean—you ain't takin' me in?"

Sheriff Harrison yawned. "I'd admire if you'd consider this a social call, Tommy, and leave me sleep the day around in your bunk." He crossed the floor and picked up his sixgun and examined it. "You bunged up my trigger guard some."

Tommy Clay was watching him, a quizzical expression on his homely face. He said, "The more I think about it, you old trail wolf, I don't believe I took that gun away from you at all. You ain't *that* old and feeble. I bet you let me take it a-purpose, just to try me."

The sheriff yawned again, and grinned and shrugged. "It was anyhow one way of manufacturin' us some proof, wasn't it?"

Tommy Clay turned to put the coffee on. In an awed voice he said, "You risked your life just to give me a chance to prove up. Supposin'—supposin' I'd pulled trigger when I had you hung in my sights?"

"If you had, I'd of been bound to arrest you."

"If I had, you'd of been dead, you mean!"

"That's plumb debatable," Het Harrison told him. "Exceptin' for the bullet I fired into the wall when you grabbed my hand, I took all the loads out of that gun before I braced you."

THE GUNSMOKE

A New, Bang-up Christian Defever Novelette

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

Christian Defever, victor of a thousand trigger tilts, wanted to help the bull-voiced Lil Manning in her desperate fight against the land-grabbing Menlo—but Defever's toughest job was first to convince Lil that he wasn't the worthless, whiskey-soaked scarecrow she had branded him.

BROKER ★ ★ ★

Defever lashed a great, bony fist into the man's face.

CHAPTER ONE

Man for Hire

MOMENTARILY possessed of funds, Christian Defever had taken a room on his arrival in Badwater at the Frontier—a modest place on a side street off of the main thoroughfare. Returning in the shag hours of the evening to these quarters, his bony frame pleasantly aglow and wholly at peace with the world, he was astonished to find his room occupied by two women. Obviously as startled by his entrance as he was by their presence, they drew back in alarm. But only for a moment. Then the older of the two caught hold of herself and bristled angrily:

"You whiskey-soaked, long-geared fugitive from a coroner!" she roared. Defever gasped at the bull-like voice which came out of her. "Did you ever hear of

putting knuckles to a door afore you walked through it? And why in tarnation is it a man can't find his own room when he's drunk? Get out of here!"

Defever blinked and took a step backward into the hall, raising his eyes curiously to the lintel over the doorway. *Room Seven,* the lettering said. Room Seven was certainly the one he had taken. Further proof was the battered old carpet bag on the bureau. No other man west of the Mississippi carried a bag like that. It was his. This was his room. He stepped back through the doorway.

"Madam," he offered placatingly—and he made a deep, loose bow to go with the words—"there has been a mistake. Perhaps if I called mine host—?"

"Mine host be damned!" the older woman snorted. "I've known Ed Freel ever since he put this rickety shack up. And I don't want to see him any more than I do you. Robin and me are waiting for Christian Defever!"

Defever took off his battered old tall beaver hat and scratched at the thin hair under it. The way this old harridan pronounced his name set him on guard. He scowled. He had hoped his stay in Badwater would be but temporary. He had come into a small windfall—a hundred dollars. And Badwater's gaming tables were famous in a modest way. He had hoped to expand his stake at some careless dealer's expense and move on, enriched, his identity beyond that of being a fortunate man at cards unknown. Now he saw this wasn't to be. This woman had spoken his name as others might speak of Wild Bill Hickock or Tom Bell or the mighty Earps. He coughed gently.

"Madam," he said, and he repeated his bow, "I am at your service. I am Christian Defever."

"You!" the older woman said, and her voice muted down with disappointment. *"You!"*

She stood suddenly up, pulled her wide, flat hat down, and caught at the hand of the girl beside her. "Get a move on, Robin!" she snapped. "We've been holding a two-faced Jack for an ace in the hole!"

The girl, her eyes troubled and half clouded with tears, held back for a moment. "But Aunt Lil!" she protested. "Where else can we go?"

The older woman jerked her arm impatiently. "To Tophet, I reckon!" she growled. "But we'll sure kick a rumpus on the way! We've been suckered by them stories we heard. Christian Defever—why Belial's Buttons!—if I can't tell a faker when I see one, my name ain't Lil Manning!"

The older woman plowed for the door, dragging the girl after her. Defever was forced to step agilely into the hall to avoid being bowled out of the way. As the pair passed him he spoke softly:

"Haste is the enemy of wisdom, ladies!"

But both his voice and the ageless counsel of the Great Bard, whom he quoted, were lost on the two women. Defever watched them down the hall. When they turned onto the head of the stairs without slacking their pace, he stepped back into his room and closed the door.

In the days when footlights winked often in his eyes—when he quoted entire plays from Shakespeare instead of the fragments still on his lips—Christian Defever was not unaccustomed to the visits of ladies. But that was long past and the surprise he had felt when he pushed open his door still clung to him. This pair had plainly come on an urgent errand. They had as plainly been disappointed in the man they found.

In a vague sort of way, Defever could imagine the pattern of their trouble and probably what they had wanted of him. Two things had finally barred him from the stage. One was a long nose for trouble. The other was a heavy derringer he carried—in costume and out. He had left the stage behind—he had gone west thinking rightly that the law would not look for an old actor beyond the plains. But he had not left either his nose or his gun behind him. And a mild legend was already building up along his backtrail across the grass country.

Defever smiled wryly to himself as he shed his coat and shoes and stretched his angular length on the bed. Women—ah! He sighed and stretched luxuriously. *Women are the curse of warriors and the balm of cravens*—ah, true! But a pleasant curse—and Defever was not thinking of the girl, who had been beautiful, but of the old harridan with the bull-like voice. For she was his kind.

DEFEVER had been sleeping heavily for an hour, yet he wakened with the alertness of a man who has but closed his eyes. From sleeping many years in hostelries such as this—and out of them—he had learned much about the sound of footfalls along hallways. Weary, drunk, exultant, despondent—there was a difference in footsteps. Automatically his mind registered those moving swiftly in the passage outside his room. And as they registered, he vaulted soundlessly from his bed, flattening himself against the wall behind his door.

A moment later, the panel flung abruptly open and two men stepped swiftly into the room—two men with guns held ready before them. Defever reached out and pushed gently at the door while they stared for a moment at his bed, surprised it was empty. The door swung soundlessly behind them. When the latch clicked they wheeled in startled unison—to face the enormous derringer in Defever's hand.

He nodded at the weapons each of them held. His meaning was unmistakable. Their grips loosened and the two weapons dropped to the thin carpet on the floor. Defever reached out with a foot from which a great toe protruded through a hole in the sock, and scuffed the guns across the carpet to the darkness under the bed. He straightened, then, replaced his own weapon in the high band of his trousers, and smiled genially.

"Gentlemen!" he said chidingly.

Then, remembering the old harridan's question, he repeated it.

"Did you ever hear of putting knuckles to a door before you walked through it?"

The pair stared at him with defiant sullenness. Defever measured their caliber and judged they were ordinary hirelings—probably rough-handed enough to do a fair job of mussing a stubborn man up, but hardly the kind a wise man would send on an important errand. This recognition cut his vanity a little. The actor in him was far from dead and he loved importance as he did good whiskey.

"You wanted to see me?" he went on.

One of the pair growled unintelligibly.

The other snapped a sharp query of his own: "You're Christian Defever?"

Defever inclined his head. "I am!"

"Then get out of town, brother. Get out fast! You've got till morning!"

"So soon?" Defever murmured. "But I've just arrived!"

"Mebbeso," the man grunted. "But you've talked to Lil Manning, too! So you've got to go. The Boss means it."

"Ah—*Satan came also—*" Defever said with a wicked grin. "A traveler does not have friends to his quarters of an evening. You disturb my sleep to tell me this? You should know better. And it's time you were taught—"

He reached out easily with one of his long, scarecrow arms, and caught the near man. The fellow let out a strangled bleat and swung a balled fist. Defever shook him enough to displace the blow and as it swept past him he rapped the heel of his free hand smartly across the base of the man's neck. The man sagged and Defever let him fall to the floor.

The second man, closer to the door, dodged for the opening. Thrusting out a bony-kneed leg, Defever tripped him and caught him as he stumbled. The man fought savagely, driving a booted heel upward. It caught Defever in the belly, driving the wind from him and firing the hot little devil of anger which lay always close to the surface of his wide gray eyes.

Bending with an effortlessness which seemed impossible in so long and loose-jointed a body, he seized the man by one ankle and the collar of his shirt and swung him so that his head rammed solidly against a partition. He straightened, then, pulled at his shabby cuffs, and sitting unhurriedly down on the edge of the bed, drew on his shoes and coat. . . .

The clerk in the lobby of the Frontier shot a quick look of surprise at Defever and he stepped from the landing onto the main floor of the lobby. His surprise was still in his eyes when Defever stopped in front of the desk.

"Could you tell me the identity and the whereabouts of an estimable woman known as Lil Manning?" he asked.

The clerk's brows raised across the white expanse of his forehead. "Lil Manning?" he repeated. "Lil Manning?" He stopped and leaned suddenly across the counter. "Look, Mister, you've seen Lil Manning once tonight. That's enough! Ed Menlo's heard about it. Two of his

boys just went up the backstairs, looking for you, a couple of minutes ago. That's bad trouble. Forget about the Mannings. Nobody can help 'em—and live very long!"

"Menlo—" Defever said slowly. "And two men looking for me—ah, yes! They must be the ones!"

He pulled a quarter from his pocket and put it down in front of the clerk.

"Son, when this Ed Menlo comes looking for his two boys, you tell him they're up in my room. I don't think they're dead. And if he thinks he still has business with me, why you tell him I've gone looking for the Manning ladies!"

Christian Defever set his hat onto the top of his head, then, cocked it to a jaunty angle with a slap of his hand, and stepped out onto the streets of Badwater.

CHAPTER TWO

Ramrod in a Tall Hat

AS DEFEVER approached the second corner below the Frontier, a buckboard shot recklessly out of a side street and wheeled perilously onto the main track. For a moment Defever thought the splendid team of blacks in the harness were spooked and running out of control. A second later he realized they were being managed with consummate skill by the big, squat woman handling the reins.

He shouted but wasn't heard. The buckboard came on, threatening to pass him. Clapping a hand to the brim of his hat, he sprinted into the street, turned diagonally as the buckboard came abreast of him, and set his long legs thrashing grotesquely.

Defever's run was not graceful. But it brought him close enough to the rear of the racing buckboard to reach out his free hand to its endgate. And that was enough. He caught a tight hold, pulled, and vaulted upward. The two women on the seat ahead had been unaware of his presence on the street until his surprisingly considerable weight landed in the bed behind them and the buckboard bobbed on its springs.

Lil Manning's niece, Robin, choked off a little cry of alarm. But the big woman with the reins was silent for a moment, her eyes boring back over her shoulder at her unwanted passenger. Then she growled a sharp command:

"You wall-eyed old fool! Duck—duck, blast you! Want to be seen—or are you ready to cash your chips and don't give a damn?"

Obediently, but not wholly understanding, Defever dragged off his towering hat and sprawled his long body full length in the bed of the buckboard, finding he had a sack of grain, a box of groceries, and a Winchester rifle for company. The big woman on the seat leaned into her work with the team and the buckboard raced on through the town. At the upper end of the street, where most of the best saloons were located, a man's voice hailed out sharply—apparently from the center of the track ahead. Defever heard the woman growl. The man hailed again, angrily.

This was too much for Defever. He raised his head in time to see the face of a man flash by, barely clear of the wheels. It was obvious the man had jumped aside just in time to save himself. The face etched itself into Defever's consciousness. A long, thin-lined, angular face, young enough to be handsome but so overlaid with a sheen of hardness that any shadow of pleasantness was gone. A ruthless, dominant face, belonging to a big-bodied man with the ambition of a god and a will of iron.

Lil Manning put the buckboard into another careening, skidding turn as it hit the upper end of the street and suddenly the town was behind them. The team lined out on a straight stretch of road. She passed the lines to the girl beside her and twisted around on the seat, her eyes fastening accusingly on Defever's figure, still erect on its knees in the bed behind her.

"You want a plain pine box or a deluxe buryin' with all the fixin's?" she asked dryly.

"*Death, as the Psalmist saith, is certain to us all; all shall die,*" Defever rattled easily. "You think, then, that I've turned my number up?"

"Think?" Lil Manning grunted. "Brother, I know it! That was Ed Menlo. And he seen you!"

Defever scowled. "His look is poison?

My dear lady, I have been seen by many men, and I still live."

"You won't for long," the woman answered. "This isn't the first time Robin and me have started for the Longbow with a new hand in the buckboard. And we've never delivered one to the ranch alive yet!"

"Ambush?"

"Ambush!" Lil Manning agreed harshly. "Down in the creek bottoms where the brush is thick. Menlo's got sense enough to know the county wouldn't stand him shooting Robin or me—or we'd have got it, too. Now why in the devil's name did you climb aboard us back there?"

Christian Defever grinned. "There came to me two ladies in distress. What other course for a knight but to gird himself for battle and join the cause of the helpless?"

"We ain't helpless yet!" Lil Manning growled. "But we're gettin' there. All right, brother. You clumb aboard. Here's what. I had a brother named George that done only three useful things in his life. He married a purty gal. He was father to Robin, here. And he built up the Longbow into a first-class cattle spread. But when this Ed Menlo bought the old Spanish Belfry ranch aside of him and started squeezin', George must have figgered it was too much. At any rate, when the Longbow boys brought Bill Kimberly, his foreman, in all shot up, George's ticker quit workin' and he died right sudden.

"I was cookin' for a spread in Texas when I heard the news. I was mighty sore at George, checkin' out that way and leavin' a motherless gal and a wounded man to hold his ranch together. So I come north. And just in time, too. Robin was about ready to let Menlo take the Longbow for a price that wouldn't buy a year's tobacco for a wooden Indian! We've tied into Menlo and we'd beat him, too, if we could get a foreman that would stick to us till Bill Kimberly's on his feet again. We've had three, but somethin' always happens to 'em. We've got three Mexican brush-poppers for a crew that I'd put against any set a hands from Missoula to Monterey. But we've got to have a ramrod—a live one!"

Defever listened with keen interest, the familiar, brimstone smell of someone else's trouble wrinkling his nose pleasantly. He wondered for a brief, vague moment what the exact duties of a cow-ranch foreman were. Then he shrugged and attempted a bow which was not a success in the rocking buckboard.

"Madam, by a singular coincidence, I am not at the moment employed. Therefore, I am happy to accept your offer."

"Offer!"

Lil Manning reached across and dragged sharply at the lines. The buckboard slewed to a halt. She pointed ahead toward lower country where the darker gloom of a belt of brush wound along a creek-bottom in the darkness ahead.

"Maybe Christian Defever's the chain-lightning medicine for gamblers, crooked mine-operators and the like that we've heard he is. We'll let that go. But no goggle-eyed old fool that'd look better scarin' crows away from a bean patch than he does on a street can run my ranch!"

For the first time the girl beside the woman on the seat stirred.

"The Longbow's my ranch, Aunt Lil," she said quietly. "Let's see what Bill says before we turn Mr. Defever's offer down."

"Bill Kimberly's half dead. Ain't my judgment as good as his?"

"No, Aunt Lil," Robin Manning said honestly.

Defever sucked in his breath. He expected the volcanic older woman to ex-

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plode. But she didn't. She chuckled instead.

"You're right, honey!" she laughed blandly. "But let's keep it in the family, eh? Now, if we're goin' to see what Bill thinks of this long-geared, empty-headed scarecrow, we've got to figger a way to get through the bottoms and the bushwhackers Menlo'll have waiting there."

Defever stood up and climbed stiffly down to the ground, removing his hat and coat.

"Perhaps if we had a dummy in the wagon and I came along behind—?"

◇ ◇ ◇

LIL MANNING'S eyes brightened. Climbing over the seat, she horsed the heavy grain-sack into an upright position, worked an opening through the lacing holding it together at the top, and thrust the barrel of the Winchester on the floor deep into the grain. Taking Defever's old beaver hat, she dropped it over the projecting butt of the gun and wrapped his coat about the sack.

Defever eyed the result skeptically. From a short distance it had the appearance of a man crouching. That was true. But he thought little of the resemblance. However, Lil Manning was highly satisfied.

"The spittin' image!" she chuckled. "I'll have to watch myself I don't sit here and talk to it all the way home. Be about as interestin', at that. Now, looky, you amblin' old mule. I'm goin' to tool this rig along as slow as I can without makin' any boys ahead suspicious. You're on your dogs. You keep 'em movin' fast enough to keep a couple hundred yards behind us. If they's a shot, Robin and me'll carry on like blood had been split proper. You watch where the gun-flash comes from and get off the trail to the other side and work on past where we are through the brush. After Menlo's boys have drifted, we'll pick you up again."

Defever nodded, standing motionless in the dust of the road until the buckboard had moved on and faded from sight in the blackness. Then he started forward at an easy lope, wholly unlike the purposefully graceless run he had made up the street of Badwater to catch the buckboard in the first place. He set his pace by the sound of the wheels ahead, keeping the distance between himself and the two women constant.

He swung on like this for a quarter of a mile in which the road dropped steadily into the bottoms. Then he moved into the fringe of the brush belt along the creek. Up ahead he heard the rumble of the buckboard as it crossed a bridge. And almost immediately there was the double flash of a pair of rifles fired almost simultaneously. He heard a quick cry from Robin and Lil's angry bass roar. And he stopped motionless, full in the center of the road, a quiet smile on his lips.

For long moments he could detect no other sounds than those of despair and alarm the two women continued to make in carying out their part of the deception. Then he caught the whisper of horses working through the brush. And presently the silhouettes of two men appeared on the trail a hundred yards from him. They came on unhurriedly, one of them still cradling the rifle he had fired from ambush. Defever let them come within a hundred feet. Then, when their horses had already sensed his presence and were growing restive, he flung his voice at them.

"Ha! Knaves on the highroad at midnight!"

Startled and suddenly fearful, the men sawed violently apart. The one with the ready rifle jerked it up and fired. The slug kicked up a screen of dust from the track a yard to one side of Defever. Then the huge old derringer smashed two rolling explosions against the night air. One horse wheeled and bolted back into the brush, the limp form of its rider dangling from one stirrup. The second rider brought one of his reins with him when he tumbled from leather. The ribbon was still tightly gripped in his hand when Defever reached him and the animal was dancing nervously at the smell of blood in the air.

Defever freed the rein, saw that the horse was a good one, and mounted stiffly. Moments later he rode across a bridge and almost into the muzzle-flame of a rifle whose slug passed within inches of his bare head.

"Hold it!" he roared. And a touch of anger was in his voice. He saw that Lil Manning had dismembered the grain-sack dummy to free her rifle for use when she heard him coming. The next time she might not miss by even so narrow a margin.

"Hold it!"

The woman stood up slowly, letting the rifle slide unheeded to the floor of the buckboard.

"I'm damned!" she said in ungrudging, heavy-voiced awe. "Defever! Brother, I rated you wrong!"

Behind her, on the seat, Robin Manning smiled for the first time and chuckled softly. Defever liked the sound nearly as well as her aunt's thundering wonder. He leaned from the saddle to retrieve his hat and coat. Drawing them on, he shot his cuffs and grinned down at the two women.

"Virtue travels in many guises," he said with sonorous complacency. And he tipped his head toward the coming glow of the sun to the east. "We'll be late for breakfast at the ranch—"

CHAPTER THREE

A Tin-Plate Chief

LIL MANNING had not exaggerated when she boasted the Longbow was a first-class spread. Christian Defever was no expert, but an eye long trained to value visible detail, even in unfamiliar matters, couldn't fail to notice the taut fences and the well-sided, well-painted outbuildings; the clean, whitewashed interiors, and the sleekness of the stock in the corrals. The house had obviously been built by a man who was bringing a dream to life.

The green vigor of rich, brush-studded grasslands rolled away from the buildings toward far hills to the south. In those hills, Lil Manning told him, was the headquarters of the Belfry and the scrubby acres of the old Spanish grant which made up Ed Menlo's holdings.

Although her own doubts about the Longbow's new foreman appeared temporarily laid at rest, the big woman was plainly uneasy about the reactions of the rest of the Longbow's crew. Coming into the yard, she tried to sneak the buckboard past the closed door of the bunkhouse. But Robin foiled her in this. The girl stood up and sent a bright, shrill whistle across the yard. The door of the bunkhouse opened and three men tumbled out. Lil grumbled and heaved back resignedly on the seat. Defever pinned his gaze on the trio trotting toward them.

At first glance, there wasn't much striking about any of them. Then differences became apparent. Defever judged all three would weigh within pounds of one another. But one was even taller than Defever's own exaggerated height, one was built to medium pattern, and the last was so grotesquely short and so vast around the middle that he waddled as he ran. All three were of that sand-and-cactus breed known south of the border as *dorados* or *vaqueros*—depending on whether they lived free as bandits or as little better than slaves under the yoke of one of the great Chihuahua landholders.

"The tall one," Robin began affectionately as the three pulled up beside the wagon, "he is Puerco. A very bad *hombre* —and good with the *riata*—"

She paused, smiling. The tall man scrubbed one shabbily booted foot in the dust and grinned self-consciously.

"Pues, Señorita," he protested mildly, "it is possible there are better men with the rope—"

"Not in Sandoval County!" Robin said confidently. "And this one—in the middle—is Danny. A handsome devil, Mr. Defever, who rides like a fool!"

Danny's grin widened, but he kept his eyes curiously on Defever. The girl went on:

"And this round one—he is Centimo."

Defever understood the reason for this name. In addition to the fat man's ridiculously rotund body, his bullet head was capped with a shock of copper colored hair. Centimo! The Penny! Defever thought it was funny and he laughed.

The three men beside the buckboard, who had been watching him skeptically, appeared to like his laugh. A moment later, when Robin told them that he was their new boss, Defever saw it was going to be all right with them. And he breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't much of a crew to take against the flinty kind of lads Menlo appeared to have gathered

around him. But if they were solidly with him, much was gained.

The introductions over, Lil dismissed the three hands and drove on to the house. A man sat on the verandah, watching their approach. It was a long moment before Defever saw that he sat in a chair crudely fitted with wheels and that his legs were blanket-wrapped like those of an invalid. He followed Robin onto the porch, stopping in front of this man.

"This is Christian Defever, Bill," she said to the man in the chair. "He's going to help us."

Defever looked at the thin, strained face and the eyes in which a bitterness at being helpless boiled steadily. His ear caught the play of emotion in the girl's voice and a momentary shading of gentleness across the face of the injured man. This, he knew, was Bill Kimberly, who had been foreman of the Longbow until a bullet had cut him down. He also realized something else. This man was more important to Robin Manning than her ranch. He bowed a little.

There was no friendliness in Kimberly's gaze. The man stared coldly at Defever for a long moment, obviously making something of the worn shoes and shabby suiting hanging shapelessly on the huge, gaunt frame in front of him. Then his glance cut back to the girl.

"Robbie, you and Lil are being fools!" he said tightly. "This isn't a fire you can put out with a wet sack!" He jerked his head contemptuously at Defever. "You can't win. Why don't you listen to Menlo. Get this over with. Let the Longbow go. It's too much risk. When I've got my pins under me again I'll earn you a better spread than this one could ever be!"

The girl's face whitened. Lil Manning shoved forward.

"Listen to me, you lead-spavined maverick!" she growled. "Gents have been shot before and had to be pushed around on the seat of their britches till they was mended. Quit your belly-achin'! If you was on your feet you wouldn't quit. Why expect Robbie to? We're fightin'—and Chris Defever's givin' us a hand!"

Kimberly's brows raised scornfully. "He is, eh? Then he's got a plan of how to handle the Belfry. Let's hear it!"

Defever leaned back against the railing. "I never plan a hand till I've drawn my cards, Kimberly," he said. Then he turned to the women. "Did I hear something about breakfast—"

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THE day passed swiftly. Bill Kimberly, letting his bitterness at his own helplessness ride him savagely, avoided Defever. Both of the women, attached to the wounded foreman, seemed to be losing their first enthusiasm over their new hand under Kimberly's steady scorn. And none of them volunteered the fragments of information he needed to frame the picture of the Longbow's trouble with Menlo. As a consequence he avoided the house through most of the day, idling about in the dust of the corrals where Puerco and Danny and Centimo were working out some broomtails which needed saddle-fitting. And in his idling there was a steady purposefulness. For he made friends.

The three swarthy Longbow hands talked more freely as the day progressed. He learned that Menlo's plan was relatively simple. A series of mishaps had occurred to various men who had represented the law at Badwater, as a result of which the sheriff's office was empty and Menlo had a free hand so long as his violence did not raise the county against him in a body.

To prevent this he worked from the dark. Ambush and terrorization. The one ban he had put on the Longbow, beyond making it fatal for a rider from the spread to ride too close to a timber fringe or to leave the home ranch after dark, was to run a ragged line of barbed wire across the lower end of a fine peace of open graze, shutting Longbow herds from grass to which they were entitled by lease from the government. And a guard kept this fence intact. Kimberly had tried to run it down once, and had come home from the try on a blanket and a pair of poles.

At nightfall Defever was sitting on the top pole of the corral with the three riders. He turned to Puerco suddenly.

"If you were mixing with a hombre who had taken a black-eyed gal away from

you, and he pulled a knife, what would you do?"

Puerco thought about it methodically for a long time. Suddenly his hand moved and a ten-inch clasp-knife was suddenly glittering a pair of inches from Defever's face.

Defever looked at the others. They nodded silent approval of Puerco's remedy.

"—And if he gouged your eye—?"

Puerco made a swift, fierce motion of stabbing his own thumb under another man's eyelid. His two companions again nodded solemnly. Defever laughed and climbed down from the corral rail.

He doubted that Lil Manning and her niece had enough confidence in him yet to override Kimberly's moody counsel. In fact, he doubted his own confidence enough that he wasn't sure he could play the Longbow hand out the way it ought to go. Consequently, he spoke softly to the three hands.

"There is a place in the valley where there are *senoritas* at which to smile—and *pulque* to drink? A place where a man might go when it is too good a night to take to his bunk? Good! One of you tell the ladies you take me to such a place. Then bring three horses to the creek—and your gun-belts!"

Centimo grunted in sudden pleasure. "These *senoritas* and this *pulque, Senor*—for a fact we find them on the Belfry, no?"

Defever nodded. Centimo traded grins with his two companions and they started together for the house. When they were gone, his own features mirrored their eager grimaces. He was fully aware that when Lil Manning heard that the new hand on the ranch was trotting off with the three *vaqueros* for a bottle-session, her first impression that Christian Defever was a shag-tailed faker would return.

But at least she wouldn't guess the true target of the ride. And Kimberly wouldn't have a chance to advise her to order the Longbow crew to stay at the ranch. In the morning, if the thing was a failure, the big woman and her niece would think no less of Defever than that he was, in fact, the dilapidated vagabond he appeared to be. If there was no failure, the Manning women and possibly even Kimberly would be as solidly behind him as Centimo, Puerco and Danny. . . . The Belfry lay in the lee of the first ridge south of the Longbow boundary. Defever stopped his three companions at the top of this ridge and studied the valley below with care. Menlo had put up some raw, flimsy pine buildings for a headquarters about a mile above the weathered 'dobe ruins of the old Spanish rancho. The temporary nature of Menlo's buildings was a clear indication of his eventual plans. What need to build permament quarters when one soon day he'd have the comfortable house George Manning had built on the Longbow?

Defever grunted. Menlo was sure of himself. Defever wondered if he wasn't too sure. And from wondering, his mind nimbly jumped to a desire to know. He turned to the three Longbow hands waiting impassively behind him and gave his orders to them—orders which brought liquid grins to their faces and wicked eagerness to their eyes. Then he set steel to his own mount and circled along the ridge to come out on a steep slope behind Menlo's buildings.

The moon, having raised early, was already low in the west, lengthening shadows and giving an increasing cover of blackness to men who moved on a cool job of work. Defever moved down the slope with the lengthening shadows, his eyes steadily on the buildings ahead. A tar-paper shack, obviously the bunkhouse, was dark. But the cabin which he judged was set apart of Menlo, himself, burned brightly with lights, and he worked unhurriedly toward it.

Leaving his horse about a hundred yards from the building—close enough to be reached in a hurry but still hidden in a clump of brush far enough away to be safe—Defever moved on afoot. Reaching the rear wall of the cabin, he pulled up for a moment. He was putting a lot of faith into the reliability of Puerco and Danny and Centimo. He was acutely aware of this. But he was untroubled.

Menlo had been successful in alarming the two Manning women. A bullet from one of his hired guns had taken all the fight out of young Bill Kimberly. And the reputation of the hard-cases who rode his iron had destroyed any chance the Mannings had of hiring fresh recruits, themselves. But he had been unable to touch

the Longbow's three Longbow *vaqueros.*

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MENLO wouldn't understand this. Men served him because they were hired, because they were paid in spending gold. They fought and ran risks because the pay was high; because Menlo was a hard customer who made a better boss than an enemy. Menlo wouldn't understand men who cared nothing for pay and scarcely more for risk and danger—men who would stick to a pair of women and a wounded man and an old fool because that was where they belonged—because the Longbow was their iron.

The boss of the Belfry had scratched Puerco and Danny and Centimo off as no odds. Likely he had scratched off the old actor Lil and Robin had managed to spirit onto the ranch, even in spite of the two mauled men in a room at the Frontier and the two others dead on the road out from town.

And there was his mistake. Defever grinned, felt in one sagging pocket of his threadbare coat to check the supply of loose cartridges he always carried there, and slid on around the corner of the cabin. He ducked under a window, eased to the door, and suddenly kicked it open.

Menlo was not alone in the lamplight. The boss of the Belfry sat at a table in the center of the room, the littered dishes of a careless meal still stacked under the lamp in front of him. Back of Menlo, against a side wall, a huge man was dozing in a chair. It was this man, for all his dozing, who jerked first to his feet. He half-clawed a gun from his belt, then let it slide back under the level caution of the derringer in Defever's hand. This giant was, Defever knew, Menlo's segundo, Big Cassidy.

"What the hell—?" the big man grunted stupidly. Menlo cut him off short.

"Defever!"

A warning to Cassidy was in the single, snapping word.

In the doorway Defever smiled tightly, took a step forward, and swung the door closed behind him against the possibility of one of the hands at the bunkhouse seeing a stranger at the boss' door and coming up to investigate.

"Christian Defever, gentlemen," he said sonorously. "Sit down—*sit down!*"

Ed Menlo's taut body eased back with deceptive carelessness. Big Cassidy, his mind a poor match for his lightning muscles at meeting something new, shook his head perplexedly. But when Defever's glance hit him a warning blow, he growled and sank back onto his chair.

"I am a cautious man—" Defever said gently. "Your guns—"

Menlo's lip twisted, but he drew his piece carefully and pushed it out on the table. Defever crossed, lifted it, and dropped it into the pocket of his coat. Big Cassidy parted with his weapon more slowly, a dull anger building up in his face. But when Defever had shoved the muzzle of the derringer to within a handbreadth of his head, he passed the gun across. Defever backed into the center of the room, then, grinning.

Menlo leaned sharply forward. "You wall-eyed old fool—" he started to rage.

Defever stopped him coolly. *"The wise call no man a fool,"* he intoned swiftly, *"it is a title which worketh in two ways.* You're a tough outfit, aren't you, Menlo?"

The Belfry boss glared out of lidded eyes. "Ask Kimberly—or the coroner in Badwater!" he snapped. "You're out of your depth, Defever. You're going to wish you never rode this way!"

"Maybe," Defever nodded his head in agreement. "But before I'm sorry, there is going to be a couple of women who'll be mighty glad. I play a fair game, Menlo. You can walk off of this spread and get out of this valley. Or you can be drove off. It's your pick!"

"Talk big, go ahead!" Menlo growled. "This is your deal. But I'll have the cards tomorrow. And you and me and Big Cassidy are going to get into a room like this then. I'm going to sit right in this chair and watch Cassidy take every rusty joint in your carcass apart. You ain't a saint, Defever. I've heard enough about you to know that. You expect to get something out of throwing with the Mannings. And they've got nothing to pay you off with. I've got it all. That's where you're crazy."

Defever turned slowly, looking at the hulking bulk of Big Cassidy. An animal-

like, terrible strength was visible in every line of the giant's body. There was also an animal-like brutality. Cassidy's eyes were bright in anticipation of the promise Menlo had just made. Defever stared unwinkingly at the man and peeled off his coat. Crossing behind Menlo, he tossed the garment with its pocket-load of guns into a corner and jerked a riata from the wall. Menlo plainly understood what he meant to do but made no effort to stop him, his eyes gleaming with confident expectancy.

Holding Cassidy in his seat with the threat of the derringer stuck ready in his waistband, Defever swiftly tied Menlo in the chair. This done, he stood up suddenly, tossed the derringer on top of his coat, and stepped toward Cassidy.

The big man heaved up, then, suddenly realizing this wild man who aimed to fight in a battered beaver hat was deliberately baiting him. A soft roar sounded in Cassidy's throat—and he charged.

Leaving his hat on had been purposeful bravado on Defever's part, just as choosing Cassidy was also bravado. Menlo and the giant, as well as the calloused gunhands who rode the Belfry, lived by a confidence in their own flint. If he could shatter that—

Watching Cassidy as the man shuffled forward with an awkwardness which was as swift and dangerous as a great cat's gracefulness, Defever's whole body grew tight. Even in the days of his reckless youth when his own frame was plaited with thick muscles, he knew he would have been no match, strain for strain, for Big Cassidy's murderousness. But the Great Bard had said:

"Old men learn many lessons before they die. . . .

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AND Christian Defever had learned his exceptionally well. Cassidy came in with hands hung low and a little outward, set to spring like the jaws of a trap as he reached his foe. Defever twisted away at the last moment, leaving one leg solidly in the man's way. Cassidy hit it, stumbled, and went down heavily.

Defever slid aside and waited for the man to come to his feet. When Cassidy did come up, it was like a striking snake. His shoulder was hunched into a ram which caught Defever under the point of his breast-bone and he slammed back against the wall, gasping. His knees weakened and he slid to the floor, fighting for breath.

Cassidy growled triumphantly, took two short steps, and leaped through the air. With the room reeling in front of him, Defever saw the man intended to land on him with both booted feet. He rolled frantically and a quick anger seized him. Cassidy landed heavily and off-balance, because his target had shifted, and staggered against the wall.

Defever doubled his knees under, came up, and lashed a great, bony fist into the man's face as he turned. Cassidy's growl turned into a full roar at the blow and he charged again. Defever ducked low, straightening as Cassidy's bulk plowed

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into him. There was a terrible power in that straightening lift. Cassidy left the floor, turned awkwardly in mid-air, and crashed down through the table in front of the bound Menlo.

Defever followed him, and as Cassidy started up again, shaking his head, the bony fists cut in mercilessly. Cassidy whimpered a little, swore, and swept the air with his hands. Defever waited until he was full on his feet, then whipped the full weight of his body behind a drive to the big man's belly. Cassidy lost his wind in a grunt of hurt protest and rocked on his heels. After that it was as mechanical as carving a roast.

If Ed Menlo, watching helplessly while a thing he had thought would be a victory turned into a massacre, had not believed some of the vague yarns men heard about Christian Defever, he had to believe them, now. Brutal as it was his nature to be, Big Cassidy had never mauled another man as thoroughly as Defever mauled him in the next hundred seconds.

It stopped as suddenly as it had begun. A shout sounded outside and the slam of a rifle came from a little distance. Defever snatched up his hat from where it had fallen and tugged his coat on. He stopped in front of Menlo and prodded Big Cassidy's whimpering bulk with his toe.

"This is a beginning, Menlo!" he panted. "There's more—a lot more!"

Menlo swore and fought with his bonds. Defever ducked out the door. There was a light in the Belfry bunkhouse, now, and a brighter light behind it, where a torch had been touched to the tarpaper walls. He grinned and started a sprint toward the brush where he had left his horse. A man shouted and ran from the building to drop on one knee and swing a rifle up.

Defever held his breath. But from the night a rifle snapped and the man in front of the bunkhouse kicked suddenly prone and quiet, his rifle spilling to one side. Defever's grin widened.

More men poured from the bunkhouse as the alarm spread. Another fire blossomed at the shack beside the corrals which served for a barn and harness shed. And when some of the Belfry crew started throwing lead at the only foe they could see, an old gent with a tall hat and flying coat-tails doubling up the slope back of the ranch, three scattered rifles began a methodical screening of the yard and drove the Belfry men to shelter.

Defever reached his horse and hit saddle without breaking his stride. The animal, spooked by the rolling thunder of rifle fire, shot on up the slope in a wild run.

Ten minutes later Defever fought the animal to a standstill on the crest of the ridge. The Belfry headquarters had turned into a beacon which lighted a great circle of the darkness. Men were still shouting and running wildly about the inferno of burning buildings. But the three unhurried rifles which had held Belfry in check while Christian Defever sprinted up the slope were now silent.

Defever waited impatiently, becoming momentarily more alarmed as no sounds from down the slope indicated the safe withdrawal of the *vaqueros* who had watched their timing so closely and had done the job he had given them so well.

Then, just as he was about to rein back down the slope in a reckless search for them, the Longbow crew loped up to him.

"*Pues!*" came Centimo's marveling voice. "It is so beautiful!"

Defever grunted relief.

Puerco rode close to him leaning confidentially forward. "*Ai!* Is more better even than the *senoritas* and the *pulque* we told them at the rancho, eh?"

Danny chuckled and began to hum. The four of them moved on along the top of the ridge with unhurried satisfaction. Three of them began to sing. The fourth, well knowing no actor ever lived who could sing, held silent and listened.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullet Brokerage

AT BREAKFAST in the sunlit kitchen of the Longbow house, Defever let the story of the night's foray out in fragments. Robbie Manning scarcely listened to him, watching Bill Kimberly's now alert face with a fixation which seemed to Defever to be entirely out of place in the middle of a red-hot war. Lil, however, once she had it clear that the Longbow had suffered no hurt on the foray, banged rolling phrases of delight

around the room until the kettles on the shelves rattled. And Defever saw that when he had finally gotten the whole story out, even Kimberly was impressed.

"That was smart business, Defever," the wounded man approved tersely, "hitting Menlo hard enough to set him back on his heels. That kind of yellow-belly can't stand hurt. He'll come back, now. And it'll be at the drift fence he's strung across the open graze. He'll cut his own wire and try to drive as many head of our stuff through it as he can, hoping we'll tumble after the stock. We should be there when he comes, we should hit him again. If it had been me, I'd have stopped there with the boys this morning instead of coming on in here!"

Defever nodded owlish agreement. "If it had been you—yes. And that's what Menlo'll expect. He'll forget he still isn't dealing with you, Kimberly. He'll by-pass the fence deliberately, and he'll figure if he comes straight in here, he'll catch the women alone. He'll have a wallet full of small bills and a grant deed ready to sign. He'll figure he can drive his game through now, roughing the women if they're stubborn. That's why we came back!"

Kimberly shook his head. "No!" he said.

"You had ought to stick by Bill, Christian Defever," Lil said. "You don't know Ed Menlo and he does—"

Defever smiled and came onto his feet. He could have explained that Ed Menlo had many fellows cast in the same mold and that when a man drifted on the scant of troubles, he learned the kind well. But he said nothing, moving to the window and drawing back the curtain.

Everyone at the table could see the flat grass southward. There, riding as the Apache used to ride—with the whole of their company spread into a wide line abreast to give the appearance of tremendous force—came the Belfry. Ed Menlo and a dozen men, even to the raw, battered face of Big Cassidy.

Lil Manning gripped the edge of the table with tanned, capable hands and began to softly mutter leathery men's curses. Bill Kimberly's face blanched. And Robbie Manning, seeing this change in Kimberly's face, shot an accusing stare at Defever.

"Quick!" she urged. "Warn Puerco and the others! Let them get away. You've messed it up, Mr. Defever! We should have listened to Bill in the first place. Menlo wouldn't have come here if you hadn't prodded him. We're finished now!"

Defever ran bony fingers through the gray shock of his hair and his eyes twinkled with pleasant deviltry.

"*Judge not the face of things ye have not yet felt—*" he said quietly. "Warn the boys? They've been expecting this. The horses are hidden. So are my comrades. Treat Menlo as if the three of you were here alone—and beaten. Don't blink an eye. And if anything happens, sit tight. If we save the Longbow I've got a brokerage coming. I don't want to lose it!"

Kimberly looked up with a sharp, half-believing hope in which there was a fresh-streak of admiration. Robbie saw it and her tension eased. Lil, being neither young nor in love, was the only one to get the full significance of the balance of Defever's planning.

"You curly old wolf!" she marveled. "You've got him—I hope!" She leaned a little forward and brought the flat of one of her hands down approvingly in the center of his back.

"They's a clothes chest in Robbie's room that'll hold you. Crawl into it!"

Defever winced at the blow, picked up his hat, and ducked into the room which Lil had indicated. There was a dressing table against one wall, and opposite it, a tall old chest which stood nearly to the ceiling. He opened the door, thrust the dresses out of his way and stepped in.

Sounds were a little muffled, but there is one advantage to large and hairy ears. They hear well. By closing his eyes so that he could see before his mind the yard of the Longbow, he watched the Belfry ride into the ranch by the sounds he heard. Menlo was confident. That was evident in the way his crew rode. But the man had that careless fragment of caution which went with his nature. Three or four of the Belfry riders fanned off from the main party to ransack the bunkhouse. It was empty, of course.

Defever grinned when he heard the searchers rejoin their boss in front of the house. Puerco and Danny must be a

bit crowded, with Centimo's girth, packed into the little well-house over the pump. But the place was so small and cramped it made a good place to hide. Even a cautious man wouldn't think of looking there was a whole crew.

There was a period of silence after the search. Then steps sounded on the porch and a heavy hand rattled the front door. Lil's boots sounded with extra heaviness as she crossed to open the portal—the extra sound being, Defever knew, to help him know what was happening. Menlo's voice came after this, smooth and triumphant and mercilessly savage. Delivering his ultimatum, tossing a wad of bills and a deed onto the table and demanding that Robbie take one and sign the other.

There was besides this a steady filtering of sound and Defever knew Menlo's whole party was filing into the main room of the house to give full weight to the man's demands. This was sound business on Menlo's part. Defever approved it ungrudgingly, willingly giving a foeman credit for his game.

A braver woman than a girl in love with a temporarily helpless fighting man would have to crumple before the combined impact of that crew. Menlo was figuring that the girl knew the damage done the Belfry in the night, and that fear of impending revenge would add to her already solid knowledge of his ruthlessness.

Lil Manning's voice came, thundering through the house in words he could not understand. His grin widened. It was down to a fine point, now. Robbie was moving toward the table where Menlo had flung his insulting little heap of bills and his bid for title to the Longbow. Lil was afraid the foreman she had hired at Badwater might miss his timing. So she was warning him.

Pushing open the door of the chest, Defever stepped back into Robbie's bedroom. Pausing before her dressing table to set his hat by the mirror there, he saw a fancy glass bottle. Curious, he raised it to his nose. The wide nostrils flared appreciatively and he paused an instant longer to douse a little of the liquid in the bottle onto his lapel. Then he dropped his derringer among the loose shells in his sagging coat pocket where he could handily reach it when there was need, and stepped suddenly into the outer room.

His ears had done well by him. The Belfry was lined up along the outer wall of the room with the front windows at their backs. Ed Menlo, smiling easily, was standing just back of the lamp table in the middle of the room. Kimberly was hunched in white-faced strain on his chair in the kitchen doorway. Robbie, with Lil backing her solidly, was in the act of drawing out the chair by the table.

And he had done well in his guessing. The red-bordered square of a printed deed form was on the table. The only thing he had missed was Menlo's money. He had not brought a small stack of bills but a leather pouch containing coins—probably Mexican gold.

"Gentlemen!"

He said the word roundly, making the sound hit the room at the same instant that he appeared.

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MENLO and Cassidy wheeled toward the sound, the rest of the crew lagging a little in surprise. Defever's smile was bland. He reached for the pocket of his coat. He heard Lil cry out at his folly in coming into the room without iron already in his hand. But Defever knew the value of magic in breaking the nerve of even a man who held no stock in the impossible.

Both Menlo and Cassidy spread their hands for their own weapons when they saw that clumsy reach for the sagging pocket begin. And both of them drew their weapons from leather. But Christian Defever, who used his Allen & Thurber as often as he did the wisdom of the Great Bard, knew how his pocket hung. Before the barrel of any Belfry gun could tilt upward, the derringer roared angrily and Ed Menlo stared at a numb and lead-splashed hand from which the weapon had been torn by a round .51 calibre slug.

At the far end of the Belfry line a little, pock-marked man had also freed his weapon. It was rocking swiftly into line, the eyes behind it eager with a desire to win glory by tagging an old fool who had beaten both Ed Menlo and Big Cassidy cold. Defever caught the wink of this new

danger out of the corner of his eye and suddenly regretted his faith in the timing of the *vaqueros* he had planted in the well-house. However, his alarm was short-lived.

The windows giving out onto the porch —the windows behind the line of Belfry riders, shattered. A gun poked through one and spat. The pock-marked man dropped his weapon and tilted forward limply. Centimo's round and guileless face shoved through the broken pane behind the gun. He raised the weapon, blew coolly at its smoking barrel, and spoke mockingly.

"*Que duerma bien,* little one," he grinned. "Sleep well!"

As a man, Belfry wheeled. Smiling like devils who had heard a great joke, Danny and Puerco were at the other windows, their guns low and level and hungry. Christian Defever heaved a huge sigh of relief and turned the hard, bitter mockery of his own stare on Ed Menlo.

"Sit down, comrade," he invited softly. "Sit down and write out that deed: 'The Belfry ranch, lock stock and barrel, to Robin Manning in consideration of damages sustained by her. *Hic semper tyranus, Deus mundi, non compos mentis,* and *et cetera!*' "

Lil Manning grunted surprise at the terms of surrender he demanded. Kimberly shot a curious look of measurement at him—as if the man doubted he could do this but was willing to believe it on proof. Ed Menlo kept his face turned a little away for a moment, his restless eyes taking in the three *vaqueros* at the window, the helplessness of his own crew, and Defever's inflexibility.

Defever saw that Menlo was fighting hard against the realization he had been tricked into his ambush in a place where he had expected to find only two women and a helpless wounded man. Menlo fought hard. But the muscles of Defever's face were tightening and the man seemed to realize his time was running short. He folded with jerky stiffness into the chair at the table and dipped the pen there. He paused for a moment. Then, with angry haste, he drove the pen across the red-bordered deed form. There was

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no sound but the scratching of the pen on the stiff paper. Having signed what he had written, he threw the pen to the floor and came up out of his seat.

Defever grinned. *"Revenge is a kind of wild justice*—for a fact!" he said. "Get moving, Belfry."

Menlo shrugged and turned away from the table. He started for the door, his men opening a passage for him. His shoulders hung heavily as though the fight had gone out of him. Defever watched him with a certain admiration, thinking that the man might have done well once on the stage, where acting was a trade. Big Cassidy stood in Menlo's path. As the Belfry owner reached his segundo, Menlo's whole body snapped erect and his hand stabbed wildly. Defever tipped his Allen and Thurber, but he waited until Menlo had snatched Cassidy's gun and had made a full pivot.

Then he tightened his grip against the derringer's feather trigger without regret. The short gun's full-throated roar shook the room again. Menlo died on his feet, staggered against Cassidy, and slid to the floor. The last vestige of bravado in the Belfry crew died with him. Defever pocketed his weapon and shuffled the pen, ink, buckskin bag, and paper on the table. When he moved away from it, only the pen and ink were left on the table top. He handed Menlo's deed to Robin.

The girl took the paper blankly, yet only half understanding that the enemy who had been so savagely crowding her inheritance was gone, and that she was now mistress of two ranches instead of one. Defever saw her eyes clouding with happiness and he knew her gratitude would surface in a moment. Maybe Bill Kimberly liked soft women and the incoherence of their thanks. Defever did not. They embarrassed him. And he hated embarrassment. He wheeled toward Puerco, nodding his head at the broken-backed Belfry crew.

"Get 'em out!"

Puerco grinned and prodded the nearest man. The Belfry riders filed out the door. The voices of the Longbow crew, hoorawing the wolves from across the ridge as they disarmed them and drove them out of the yard, drifted back to the house. Defever picked up his hat from where it had fallen when he made his draw against Menlo and Cassidy. He swept it across in front of him and bent low in front of Lil Manning.

"I will trouble you for a horse," he said. "I'll leave it at Badwater. I bid you good by!"

"Good by?" she protested. "Now? Why, you've got thanks at least coming for what you've done!"

"Madam," Defever said piously, "my good works bring their own reward!"

He sucked air in so that his chest stood out as though with righteous pride, clapped his hat onto his head, and stepped swiftly onto the porch. Ed Menlo's horse stood head down at the rail. Defever vaulted awkwardly into the saddle, worked his long legs frantically until his toes hooked stirrups, and wheeled the animal in a stiff-legged lope toward the road to Badwater. Robin Manning pushed Kimberly's chair through the door. Defever caught a fragment of her tribute:

"—the best man I ever saw—except you, Bill. . . ."

Defever wondered about the girl's aunt. She had made an impression on him. He felt a little disappointed that his own charm hadn't brought her to the porch for this farewell. But he was hasty. She came.

"The best man—" she echoed thunderously— "That skull-faced old baboon lifted that pouch of coin on the table when we weren't looking—and me thinking he'd throwed us a rope out'n the good of his heart! He's a buck-ribbed renegade old scoundrel—"

Lil paused for breath, and the fury went suddenly out of her.

"—bless his buttons!" she finished softly.

Defever chuckled at the words and the pleasant feeling of Menlo's buckskin pouch, rattling among the shells in his coat pocket and bumping his thigh with every stride of his horse.

"Brokerage!" he muttered.

And he blithely turned his mind away from the liberated Longbow to certain gaming tables where a man who cozened luck might run a few gold coins into a modest fortune.

THE END

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OWLHOOT HAVEN

Apache squalled with pain!

By GUNNISON STEELE

THE river made a low, mellow sound in the gathering dusk; the wind, heavy with the pungent smells of the bottomlands, ran softly through the trees. The five men in the old shack there beside the stream, as always, had their ears attuned to the wind—so they heard the rider while he was yet two hundred yards away.

Obviously, the oncoming rider was no lawman. He was whistling a tuneless ditty, and they could hear the passage of his horse through the thickets along the river. But they were taking no chances. Rawboned, gray-mustached old Bearpaw Boone, leader of the five, snapped quick orders.

"Red, you, Ben Kipp and Little Tim go outside and into the brush. Drue, you stay here with me."

Ben Kipp, Little Tim and Red Teak got up and slid silently through the doorway into the dusk. Apache Drue, a big, dark, hawk-faced man, said nothing, but there was cat-wariness in his shiny black eyes as he got up and moved to a position near the doorway. There was a gun in his hand.

Bearpaw said, "Careful with that gun, Drue."

They could hear the rider as he came steadily along the river. Then, suddenly, he came into the brush-hemmed little clearing before the shack, looming darkly in the shadows. Obviously he had been headed for the cabin, for he pulled up and called out loudly:

"Hello, the cabin!"

From the brush, Ben Kipp said, "We got guns on you from all sides, stranger. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I'm looking for Bearpaw Boone's bunch. I heard they could be found hereabouts."

"Who told you that?"

"A bird, mebby, or the wind."

"Who are you?"

"Just call me Utah. Well—I've come a long piece and I'm tired and hungry."

"Light down," said Ben Kipp. "But you better be alone, and you better not be tryin' to pull any tricks. He lifted his voice, "All right, Bearpaw!"

Leaving his mount ground-hitched, and walking before the three long-riders, Utah went into the cabin. Bearpaw had lighted a lantern and set it on a makeshift table. In its murky red light the five outlaws eye-measured the newcomer.

He was a lanky, pantherlike man, with yellow hair and lean, angular features. He wore a single staghorn six-shooter, tied low. There was a tough, hard look about him.

Old Bearpaw said, "We don't take to strangers here, Utah. What's your business?"

"Why, I'm lookin' for a good bunch to tie up with," Utah said.

"We don't know anything about you. Might be that you're a star-toter."

"No, you don't know anything about me, and I won't tell you much. But I'm not a star-toter."

Apache Drue said, "I don't like it."

Utah turned lazy eyes on Drue. "I didn't ask you anything, dark man."

Apache Drue cursed softly.

Bearpaw said, "Smooth your hackles, Drue. I'll decide this. As to that, Drue, you was a stranger to us when you showed up here two months ago and asked to be took in. He turned to Utah and, withholding judgment, said, "Little Tim will take care of your bronc. We just et, but there's chow left. Help yourself."

Utah ate in silence. Afterward, they talked sparingly. Utah told just enough to make them see he knew his way about.

After a while Apache Drue produced a deck of cards and he, Red Teak and Ben Kipp started a poker game on the table. Drue was a hard poker player, and he'd seemed to be plentifully supplied with money when he showed up here in the bottomlands two months ago and asked to be taken in.

Utah watched the game for a while, then he strolled over, pulled up a box and asked, "Mind if I take a hand?"

"Your money's good as anybody's," Red Teak said.

Utah lost the first pot, then won a couple. It soon became evident that he was a match for any of them. After he entered the game, Apache Drue lost steadily. Drue's eyes got ugly and he made several pointed remarks, which Utah ignored.

Old Bearpaw watched silently from the shadows. He could hear and smell the river outside, and as usual his ears were attuned to the wind. A wildcat yowled off in the thickets, seeming to startle into silence all other sounds in the night.

"Pretty good, ain't you?" Apache Drue sneered.

"Fair," Utah said. "I don't aim to be a lamb among wolves."

"Meanin' what by that crack?"

"Why, nothin' special. I'm not callin' anybody a cheater, if that's what you mean—though I can think of worse things than a card-slick."

"A tinhorn's pretty low in my book," Ben Kipp said. "What you got in mind that's lower?"

Utah said slowly, "I was thinking, I reckon, about something that happened in a town a couple of hundred miles north of here a while back. I didn't see it, but I heard about it later. A walloper rode into town and stuck-up the bank there. No

complaint there. And mebby him shootin' down the cashier as he stood with his hands up, could be overlooked by some folks. I'm thinkin' about somethin' that hapened after he left the bank.

"As this holdup rode along the street, makin' his getaway—a kid, seven or eight years old, started to cross the street. The kid would've made it, too, if this holdup gent hadn't deliberately swerved his horse and ran the button down. The kid didn't live more than an hour."

"The holdup make his getaway?" Red Teak asked.

"Clean away. And nobody saw his face, because he wore a mask. . . . Your deal, dark man."

Apache Drue dealt the cards. He had been losing steadily, and he was in an ugly humor. This pot gave promise of being a big one. After the fourth card had hit, and after several raises between Utah and Drue, Kipp and Red Teak dropped out. Drue pushed in the last of the money before him, picked up the cards to deal. He must have been nervous, for every man in the room saw him get his fifth card, an ace, from the bottom of the deck.

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BUT those not in the pot remained silent. This was the tall stranger's affair. Utah gave no sign that he'd seen. He flipped his hole card, and said, "A pair of kings for the pot."

"That last ace fixed me out," Drue said triumphantly, and reached for the pot.

Utah moved with incredible swiftness. His hand lashed out, and there was a sharp *plunk!* Apache Drue squalled with pain and surprise—and then he sat still, wide-eyed, looking at the long-bladed knife that pinned his gun-hand to the table.

Without checking the speedy arc of his hand, Utah drew his gun. The gun covered Drue, but he sat so he could see every man in the room.

"Let the pot lay, Drue," Utah said coldly. "A blind man could have seen you steal that ace. But I'm not interested in the pot. I said a while ago that the skunk who ran that kid down wore a mask so nobody could see his face. But there was one way he could be identified: When the skunk reached through the window for the sack of bank money, his right sleeve slipped up—and the bank president swears that on the bandit's arm, just above the elbow, there was a purple birthmark that looked exactly like a cluster of grapes."

As Utah reached out a hand, Apache Drue tried to jerk his arm away, then whimpered with pain and sat still. Utah pushed up the big man's shirt sleeve—and there on Drue's arm was a purple mark shaped like a cluster of grapes.

The four other outlaws had got to their feet. Silent and unmoving, they looked.

"For nearly three months I've been on a cold trail," Utah went on grimly. "But, a little while ago, I got almost certain proof as to where I could find my man. Drue, you murderin' skunk, that button you ran down was my kid!"

Terror made a slow pattern across Drue's face. He said hoarsely, "Bearpaw—Ben—you aim to stand there and watch him kill me?"

"I don't aim to kill you," Utah denied. "Inside my shirt is a special deputy sheriff's badge, which I asked for before I started out on your trail. The minute I turn you over to the sheriff, I'll take it off. I'll never say a word about where I found you—about who and what I've seen here tonight—but I'm takin' you out, and I'll watch you hang!" He jerked the knife from the table, took Drue's gun, snapped, "Get up, Drue!"

Drue got up, looking desperately at the four other silent, still-faced outlaws in the room. "You aim to just stand there? We're all in this together—"

None of them spoke or moved. Counting Drue, it was five-to-one against Utah.

"Move out," he said, nudging Drue toward the door.

Apache Drue made a last, frantic appeal: "I got twenty thousand dollars cached out along the river—the bank money. Cut him down, and every cent of it goes to you boys. Five thousand apiece."

Deliberately, still without speaking, the four outlaws turned their backs on Apache Drue and faced the wall.

A while later those in the cabin heard two horses move out of the clearing. They listened as the sounds faded rapidly and died and the low, mellow voice of the river crept in from the night.

HELL A LA MODE

By WILLIAM MARSHALL RUSH

Matou raged at the havoc Gulo had wrought with his traps. . . .

★

Gulo repaid kindness with kindness, and cruelty with cruelty—when he turned the bitter, icy night into a blazing hell for Trapper Matou.

★

GULO, the shaggy old wolverine, was desperately hungry after a two weeks' fast in his den under the wind-thrown spruce. Nothing made of flesh and blood could have withstood the cold, wind and snow that lashed down from the Arctic across a thousand miles of tundra to drive every living thing to shelter.

Gulo came out to find every star a twinkling pin hole in a black sky. Millions

of tiny frost crystals hung suspended in the dim glow of Northern lights. Not a sound came to his short, thick ears—ears that could hear a mouse run across the snow, or the muffled flutter of an owl's wing.

Gulo was the last wolverine in this vast land of mountains, lakes, swamps and forests. His mate had been killed the summer before.

The big weasel knew there was plenty of good food to be had. There were thousands of mice, ground squirrels, rabbits, beaver, tree squirrels and grouse. All of them were choice items in Gulo's diet. He must hunt and kill if he were to live. Nature intended it so.

His teeth were fashioned to cut and tear flesh, not to nibble at small roots like the mice, chew cuds of moss like the deer and caribou, or peel off willow bark like moose and beaver. His stomach, too, was made for meat. It was small and compact, not a huge paunch like that of a plant eater, and he must eat often to supply energy for his powerful muscles.

Gulo set off through the freshly fallen snow with slow, stiffened steps. Should he come upon a snowshoe rabbit crouched in a clump of willows he could not spring upon it in a split second as a lynx would, nor chase it down like a fox. Nor was there much chance to get a nimble tree squirrel.

The ground squirrels and beaver were safe in their frozen homes and all the mice under several feet of snow. Gulo was strong enough to cope with any four-legged animal two or three times his size. No four-legged animal was his equal in cunning and imagination, and none except his diminutive cousin, Blacktip the weasel, could match him ounce for ounce in ferocity and stubbornness. Gulo would find food, all right. He had to find something to eat soon, or die.

Trapper Lope Matou came out of his cabin which squatted deep in the snow on the shore of hard frozen Lac la Glace. He was unshaven, unbathed and sluggish from overeating, lack of exercise and too much sleep. He looked at the starlit sky through eyes raw and swollen from huddling long hours over a smoking fireplace.

The storm had spent its fury, but there was no beauty in the colorful aurora over silent tree tops for Lope, no mystery in soft shadows over the frozen bosom of the lake. It was a cold, hard world to him.

He spoke aloud in a voice that sounded weird and uncertain to his own ears, "I'll git them damn foxes and martens now. Every one of 'em, an' clear out of this God-forsaken country!"

He went back into the cabin and began to make up a back pack for a hundred miles of forest wilderness trail, out to the north and west, that he must travel on snowshoes to tend his trap line.

It was a good headquarters cabin, made of logs with cracks stuffed tightly with moss. The roof was of split logs covered with dirt. In one end was a huge fireplace laid up with stones stuck together with mud from the lake shore.

Lope had come in early the summer before, from the trading outpost sixty miles to the south, with an enormous load of steel traps and other gear on his back. He built the cabin and laid in a supply of food.

Lope's spirits rose as he thought how easy it had been to get his meat supply. That was fun. In one corner of his cabin was a barrel full of young goose breasts, stored in salt brine. He had copied a custom of the Indians and got all the geese he wanted without wasting a single shot. He built a pen of willow switches in a shallow part of the lake and herded it full of goslings, not yet able to fly, and old geese in eclipse plumage, that couldn't fly either. Then with a club he slaughtered all of them, ten times as many as he could put in the brine barrel. Only tender breasts were fit for a trapper's winter fare. He left the rest to rot.

In another corner were the dried fish. They were mostly grayling, which the Indians though fed on grains of gold from the creek bottoms, and called the flower of fishes because they were so pretty. Lope laughed at the black bear's clumsy way of wading into a stream and slapping grayling or trout onto the bank one by one, at the kingfisher's method of patiently waiting on a limb over the water for a single fish to come into exactly the right position for a swift, deadly dive. Lope made traps of willows and caught enough fish at one time to last a dozen men

through the winter. He smoked what he wanted and put them on a rack in the cabin. The rest were thrown away.

In a third corner was moose meat, salted and dried, and he had fresh frozen venison cached outside in a tree. Lope grinned as he remembered sneaking up on the yearling moose, close enough to shoot it with a pistol. The moose was feeding on tender roots of tules in four feet of water at the upper end of Lac la Glace. Its head was completely submerged as it avidly cropped its food. Lope hurried forward, but stood immobile as a tree trunk when the big animal's head came out of the water. Lope moved closer when the moose went under for another bite. A single shot from twenty-five feet killed it.

There had been no need to kill the calf moose, and later on two woodland caribou. Lope took only the tenderloins and choice cuts from the hind quarter for his own use. Maggots consumed what he left.

His pack ready, the trapper made the fire safe, dumped out some snow water from a pot on the hearth and made some kindling so he could start a quick fire on his return, perhaps in ten days, if things went well. He took down the furs that he had already trapped so far this winter —forty marten, ten foxes and two otter —tied them in a bundle and suspended it from the ceiling log with a bit of wire.

"A good two thousand dollars worth —and I'll have a hell of a lot more before spring comes!" he gloated.

Another skin Lope left hanging on a peg. It was that of a large wolverine and Lope spoke aloud to it with a jeering laugh. "Summer ketch, worth about two bucks in cash, but a thousand to get rid of.. You and yore five pups! Lope knows how to ketch old skunk bears like you. No mountain devil can get the best of Lope and stink up his traps!"

He tied the moose hide thong of his web snowshoes, shouldered his pack and started out, the only trapper in all Thickwood Hills country.

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GULO had trouble finding food. He dug under deep snow for mice, but each one was only a half bite for his forty pounds of hard muscle and empty innards. He greedily devoured the scanty remains of a snowshoe rabbit that a hungry owl had killed and feasted upon. He tried hard to find a grouse that had buried itself under the snow for warmth. Once he considered a porcupine that waddled from a hole under the rocks to a pine tree, but his better judgment warned him away from it. Hunger was preferable to a slow death from barbed needles working into his body. Only Rufus the lynx knew how to kill a porcupine without suffering quill wounds. Gulo left the porcupine alone.

Then Gulo happened upon a wide trail in the snow, packed down so firmly the wolverine's big bear-like feet sank into it hardly at all. Travel was easy, and he followed the trail. It turned sharply at a clump of alders and there, suspended in the air at the end of a cord, was a plump snowshoe rabbit. Gulo circled cautiously, his low broad head close to the snow to smell out any danger that might lurk underneath, beady eyes darting right and left, long curved claws feeling out every inch of the way, short ears registering every tiny sound.

As he advanced toward the tempting meal that hung before his eyes he caught a strange smell, sweet, sticky and wholly foreign. How was an Arctic weasel to know the odor of a bit of dried apple from California, set as bait in a figure four snare for a northern rabbit? Gulo backed away, circled and approached from another direction, grasped the small alder tree in his strong paws, bent it backward, grabbed the rabbit in his mouth, jerked it loose and feasted. Then to warn all other animals of the forest away from this danger spot he spread some of his scent, the fulsome odor that earns for wolverines the name of skunk-bear, on the small tree and parts of the trap.

He went on along the broad trail and came to a trap set in a notched spruce tree. There a marten hung by its front feet, frozen stiff. Half a rabbit—the lure that had cost the marten its life—still remained in the notch. Gulo ate the marten and rabbit, tore the trap loose from its fastenings and hid it in the snow, then spread the warning wolverine scent on the spot.

For days Gulo followed Lope Matou's

trap line and found it a bountiful source of food. Gulo ate the rabbits that were caught in Lope's snares. Gulo ate the martens and foxes that were caught in Lope's steel traps. Gulo followed Lope's well-beaten snowshoe trail day after day, destroyed the trap sets and defiled every spot where a trap had been. It was easy hunting for the wolvorine.

Lope did not stop long at his headquarters cabin with its supply of pickled goose breasts, dried fish and frozen caribou meat, after making the first round. He was anxious to start out again and pick up more valuable furs from his traps. The dumb martens walked right into the traps, he thought. There ought to be twenty or more in them right now. Foxes were almost as easy to catch. He'd clean out the country this year, then next year he'd go over south and get everything in that district. He'd make big money, Lope Matou! He was the best trapper that ever laced a snowshoe or notched a spruce tree.

He smelled the hated wolverine scent long before he got to the spot where Gulo had found the first rabbit in the snare. Where the big weasel ate the first trapped marten Lope turned back to headquarters. "I'll kill that skunk-bear if it's the last thing I live to do!" he said to himself a hundred times.

The thing to do was go and meet him. Lope backtracked as fast as he could travel. He passed up two martens and a cross fox caught in his traps, not even stopping long enough to put them out of their misery.

At a likely looking place Lope took a freshly caught rabbit from a snare and hung it head down from a dead limb on a big spruce directly over the trail. Then he set three fox traps right under it and covered them with snow. "That'll get the skunk-bear!" he said aloud. "He'll come to stand under the hare and jump to get him. Bang, goes a trap and ketch him by a front foot. He jump again. Bang, goes another trap on another foot—he jump once more and bang, goes the last trap on the hind foot. Then Lope will come and club the mountain devil to death. His hide'll make a good parka when I get the stink off."

Lope went back to the cabin, stopping only long enough to put out more traps around the slowly dying marten and fox, just in case his other set did not work.

When Gulo came to where Lope's traps were cleverly hidden in the snow in the trail it was the blackest part of the long northern night, but had it been broad daylight and the place marked with a red flag it would not have been more conspicuous to the wolverine. All of his travels were at night and he depended more upon his senses of smell, hearing and feeling than he did on sight.

He circled the big tree, sniffed the trail on the far side, felt of it with extended claws, circled back and sniffed again. Then inch by inch he explored the trail toward the hanging rabbit with his nose and claws. He started to dig where the snow was not packed down hard, but was loose and fluffy. Half-sheathed claws touched hard, unyielding metal. Broad steel jaws, held apart by strong steel springs, gaped as dangerous as an angry grizzly's open mouth, and needed only a bare touch on the trigger to send them clashing together.

Ever so gently Gulo's claws raked the springs and jaws of the trap. One slightly false move with this mechanical thing meant a slow, lingering death. Gulo knew with what he dealt. He had seen too many marten and foxes helplessly caught in these deadly traps. It was Gulo's job to destroy them.

As gently as a fox's tail brushes the ground Gulo held one big paw sideways and swept the snow from the steel. Then with a quick thrust of his head he knocked it from its hiding place. The jaws snapped, not on a wolverine's leg, but on empty air. He dealt with the other traps the same way. He tore them loose from their fastenings, carried them far from the trail and hid them under a down tree. Then he went back, took a short run at the spruce tree, scrambled up a few feet, jumped and grabbed the rabbit in his mouth, sat down in the trail and ate it.

Gulo spread his scent heavily in that spot before he left it.

He came to the other traps, those baited with live animals. He dug out the traps as before, hid them, and killed the fox and marten. He was not at all hungry, but he tore the animals to pieces and buried them.

WHEN Lope saw the havoc Gulo had wrought the trapper was half insane. He would not rest until the big wolverine was dead. He got on the trail with pistol, pack sack full of dried meat, and fur blanket. Mile after mile Gulo retreated over the way he had come. The trail was good for him, but it was also good for Lope. The trapper did not let up for a full twenty-four hours. Two hours' rest and he took up his steady dogtrot again.

Gulo was sorely pressed. He could not go long distances without sleeping. His normal life was one of short periods of activity and long ones of rest.

On a sparsely timbered rise of land Lope sighted his quarry, plodding doggedly along like a winded bear. Lope took quick sight and fired. Gulo rolled over in the snow.

"I get him! I get the devil!" Lope was beside himself with joy. He snowshoed to where the wolverine had tumbled. It was not there, but a patch of blood on the snow and a bloody trail leading downhill told Lope the wolverine was badly wounded. He followed Gulo's trail until it led him into an almost impenetrable jungle of swamps and down spruce, where snowshoeing was impossible. Then, "He's gut-shot—he'll die!" Lope said with gusto and gave up the chase.

Back at headquarters he outfitted himself for another trip around the trap line. He started out, set figure-four snares to catch rabbits which he used to bait traps for foxes and marten. All along the trail he set steel traps in new places to replace those Gulo had stolen. At the end of twelve hours travelling each day the trapper rolled into his fur blanket for a long sleep. Often he dreamed of the old wolverine and smiled in his sleep over the way he had disposed of it.

Gulo crawled away to an old wolverine den, miles from the trap line. There he rested for six days to allow his bullet scratched shoulder to heal. The wound still pained when he started back, but he plodded along slowly until he came at last to the snowshoe trail near where he was wounded. He found the frozen fox and marten meat that he had jerked from

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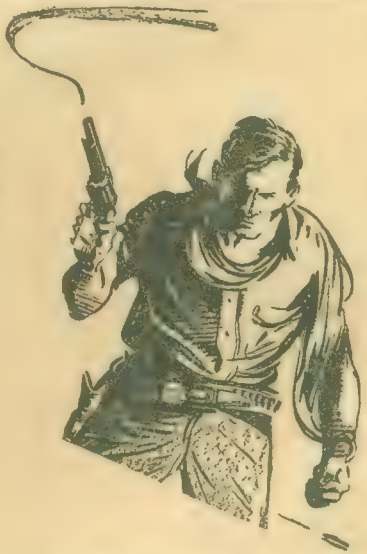

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Lope's traps, and feasted on them. It was a good meal.

Slowly, painfully, deliberately, Gulo approached Lope's cabin. He circled it, time after time, tried the trail that led to the beginning of the long trap line. Satisfied at last that the man was gone Gulo walked straight to the door and tried the latch. It was fastened securely. There was no window. The dirt roof was piled high with snow and frozen hard. Gulo started to chew the logs. They were dry and tough. He gave that up as too slow and looked around for a quicker way.

There was the fireplace of stones, loosely laid up with mud and with strong claws and forelegs he began to work loose a stone at the base. It came out and he pushed it aside. Stone by stone he tore at it as if it were a beaver house into which he dug. His rugged body was bruised when a great mass of rocks loosened and fell on him, but he kept on. His claws wore down to the quick and blood oozed from his toes, but he kept stubbornly at his task until he had opened a runway from outside to inside—and then he went into the cabin.

Gulo went about his task of despoliation with system and dispatch. He found all the fox, marten and other skins prized so highly by the trapper and tore them to bits. Only the summer-killed wolverine he left undisturbed on the wall.

He upset the barrel of goose breasts and carried out each toothsome morsel to hide in the snow. He carried out most of the dried fish and meat. Lope's pots and pans were hidden in the thickest brush Gulo could find near the cabin.

The wolverine took the frozen caribou meat far away. He took everything movable from the cabin and hid it. When everything was wrecked to his satisfaction the big wolverine spread his scent over what was left of Lope's bedding and food. When Gulo left the cabin no animal, with two legs or four, could take possession. It was as completely ruined as if it had burned to the ground.

Then Gulo took the trail again, the trap line that Lope had taken days before, the trail lined with snowshoe rabbits hung from snares, martens frozen stiff hanging from a front leg in steel traps, foxes standing with one foot caught in a metal vise.

Lope might have quit when he found his cabin wrecked, but hatred drove him on. He trailed Gulo for days, living entirely on rabbits and grouse. There were no goose breasts, no tender nourishing fish, no juicy caribou, no bread and beans. Twice he caught up with his quarry, but his hand was unsteady and his bullets went wide. All of his belongings in the Thickwood Hills he now carried on his back—an axe, a few matches, pistol, some ammunition and one fur blanket.

There came a day when Lope gave up and started south for the trading outpost, a long weary march for a beaten hungry man who had carried so lightly hundred pound loads of traps and gear. Lope was finished.

Now Gulo became the pursuer. He was relentless. Every night when Lope rolled himself in the blanket beside the camp fire Gulo came close to harass and keep him awake. One morning when Lope left his blanket at the fire and set out to get some fresh meat for breakfast Gulo came boldly in, tore the blanket to shreds and spread his scent about. Now Lope did not even have a place to sleep. The specter of death by freezing dogged him every foot of the way.

Lope's steps were short and slow as he climbed the rise of land behind which lay the outpost—heaven to Lope—he reached the top while the sun was making its short arc through a cloudless blue sky. Here on a hard-packed trail Lope untied his web snowshoes and let them lie. He was no longer strong enough to carry them. He staggered uncertainly downhill toward log cabins from which columns of wood smoke curled upward. If his strength held out for a few more miles his life would be saved.

Gulo came to the snowshoes. He sat on the snow and shielded his eyes with a great hairy paw, for his eyes were intended to use in the deep dark forests. Far out on the glaring snow Lope was a small, black weaving object.

Gulo had won his fight in his own way. He spread his scent on the webs and began the long journey back to Thickwood Hills. Spring was coming, and somewhere in the far northland Gulo must find another mate.

BANNER OF THE BRAVE

By FRANKLYN McCLARY

On an island surrounded by searching redskins, it looked like curtains for Mark Bethel and the girl he loved.

They listened for the war canoes. . . .

THE night was ominous to the two figures crouching on the west bank of the Corsicana. From out on the black water came faint coyote whimpers, but Mark Bethel knew that they weren't coyotes. Because coyotes didn't paddle war canoes, and they didn't tote blood-and-hair-matted tomahawks.

Mark whispered to his companion: "I'm gonna need your black dress, Lona."

A little gasp of surprise came from the girl. Then: "If you are sure you need it—"

"Dead sure, Lona—if we hope to get across the river to the Settlement tonight. I don't wanta unduly frighten you, honey, but this little island is surrounded by war canoes."

Her shudder was almost audible. After a moment she asked: "What are you doing with those big sticks?"

"Tyin' them together—makin' a kite."

"Of all things, Mark Bethel! Do you expect to fly back to the Settlement?"

"The dress," said Mark.

There was a rustle of clothing. "Now, don't look—"

"Don't look," muttered Mark. "Why, I can't even see the nose on my face."

She handed him the dress and was silent while he busied himself with the kite. Finally she said: "I can just picture the look on Father's face when I walk into the Settlement—without my dress."

Mark grunted. "There'll be a worse look on his face if you walk in—without your scalp."

"You are horrid, Mark. This whole thing was your idea. A nice picnic on the island, you said. And here we are surrounded by savages—"

"Who will close in at daybreak," finished Mark. "Here. Hold the kite up as high as you can. When I jerk the fishin' line, you push the kite up into the air. There's a good east wind blowing strong toward the Settlement."

On the fifth try Mark got the kite into the air. Lona's black dress, stretched on a convex cross, caught and held the east wind. A dark banner of the night, it ascended into the black heavens. A tardy moon, when it did show its face, would not tell the secret of the buckskin man's bid for freedom.

Mark tested the pull of the wind then lashed the fishing line to the trunk of a young tree. He turned to the indistinct black blob that was Lona and said:

"We can't use our boat. If the redskins don't hear our oars, they will hear the slap of water against the sides of the boat. We can't swim across; for the red devils will hear the kicking of our feet."

"Then *what,* Mark? You got me into this."

"Do you love me, honey?"

"We're engaged, aren't we? You're marrying into the Bradfield family, aren't

you? *The* Bradfields of Covington."

Mark cleared his throat. "I didn't exactly see it the way you've just put it. But—anyway—we're floatin' back across the Corsicana, with the kite pullin' us."

"That's insane, Mark! When the moon comes out *I'll* be a perfect traget! You've taken my black dress. All I have on is a white petticoat and bodice. You're using me as a shield! When the savages—"

Mark said quietly: "The savages will never see you, honey. Your hair is as dark and as beautiful as the night itself."

"What do you mean—?"

"This—" Mark brought up his hard-knuckled fist to the point of her chin—"honey."

Not even a sigh escaped her lips. Mark caught her gently and carried her limp form to the water. He couldn't trust what her nervous reaction would be out on the water—if a redskin canoe slid by within inches of them. He untied the tugging fishing line of the kite, and, holding it firmly, caught the inert girl in the crook of his right arm. Very softly, without a splash, he eased into the water on his back.

The black-robed kite caught the east wind, steadied, then started its inexorable pull. Like a phantom surface fish the buckskin man slid quietly across the water. His right arm was around the girl's shoulders under her left armpit, holding her head out of the water. Her loosened raven-black hair became a part of the night and the river.

To Mark's ears came the stealthy dip of paddles. His eyes, rolling back and to the left, saw a blacker smudge than the ebony of the river. Bearing down upon him was the graceful, cutting prow of a redman's war canoe. Perhaps he imagined the taut, predatory figures and their bristling, feathered heads.

Abruptly the paddling ceased, as the Indians peered toward the little island and listened. Their canoe, Mark saw, would cut the Corsicana within scant feet of his head. He raised his left arm, hoping the tugging kite line would not scrape their brows or pluck a feather out of their hair.

Then the canoe was safely past, and the pull of black kite was a soundless friend of the night.

The raven-black head in the crook of Mark's right arm stirred. A softly quavering voice came up to him:

"I saw that canoe, Mark. . . . All that kept me from screaming — was the thought of your fist bouncing off my chin again."

Mark tightened his grip on that precious, raven-tressed head. "Hold your tongue till you're willing to marry into the Bethel family—the Bethels o' Texas."

There was a brief, very brief moment of silence; then: "I'm willing."

That black-robed kite must have stood on its tail for several long minutes before it continued its serene flight to the eastern bank of the Corsicana—the Corsicana o' Texas.

"I'm worried about Ma..."

This boy is a casualty.

A few days ago, he was a hardened fighting man—with a glint in his eye and a set to his mouth that boded ill for his Axis foes.

Tonight he's just a bewildered lad. Bad news from home has hit him—and put him out of action—as effectively as an enemy bullet. Desperately he has tried to solve a problem back home; his mother ill, lonely, helpless—and apparently nothing he can do about it.

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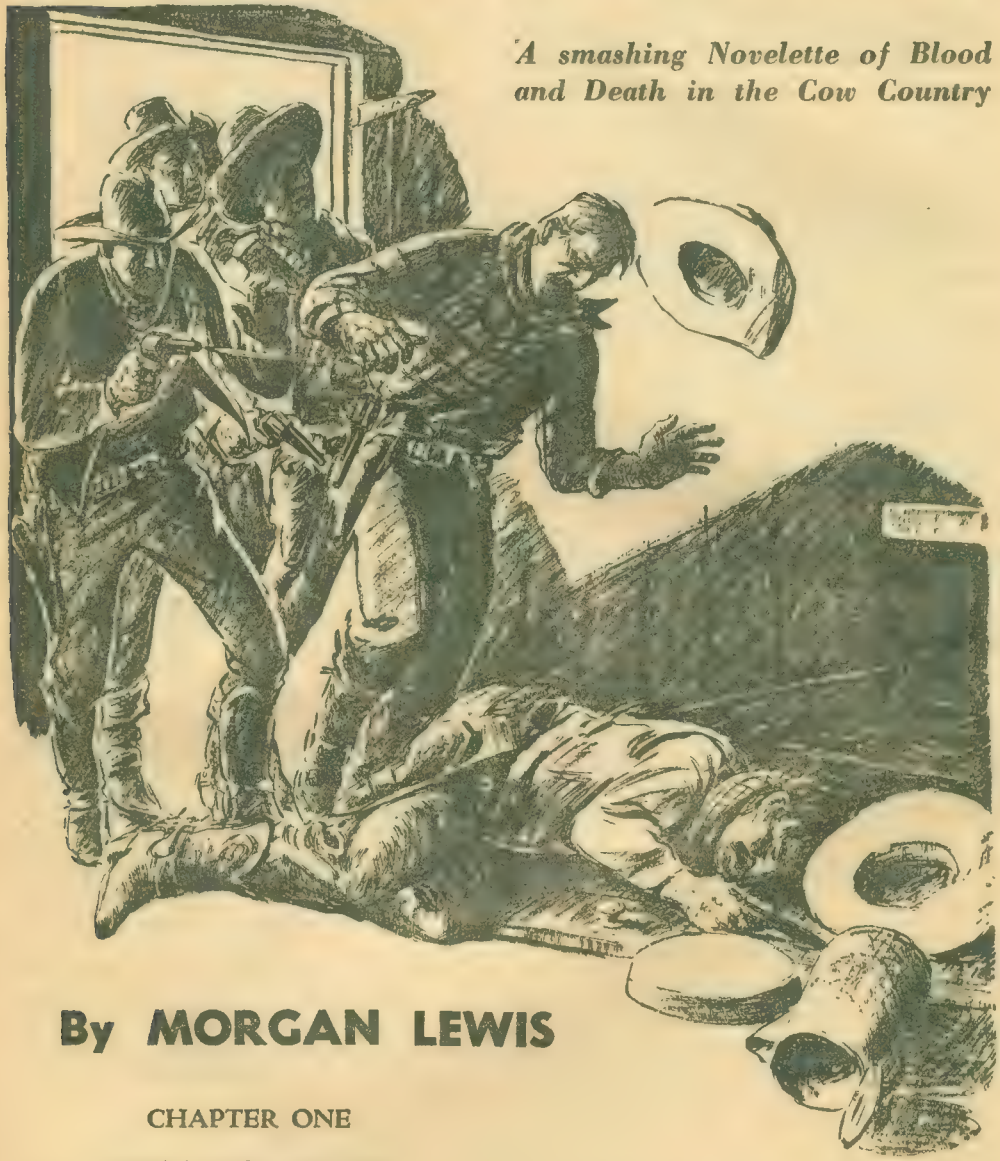


By MORGAN LEWIS

CHAPTER ONE

Death Trap for a Gunman

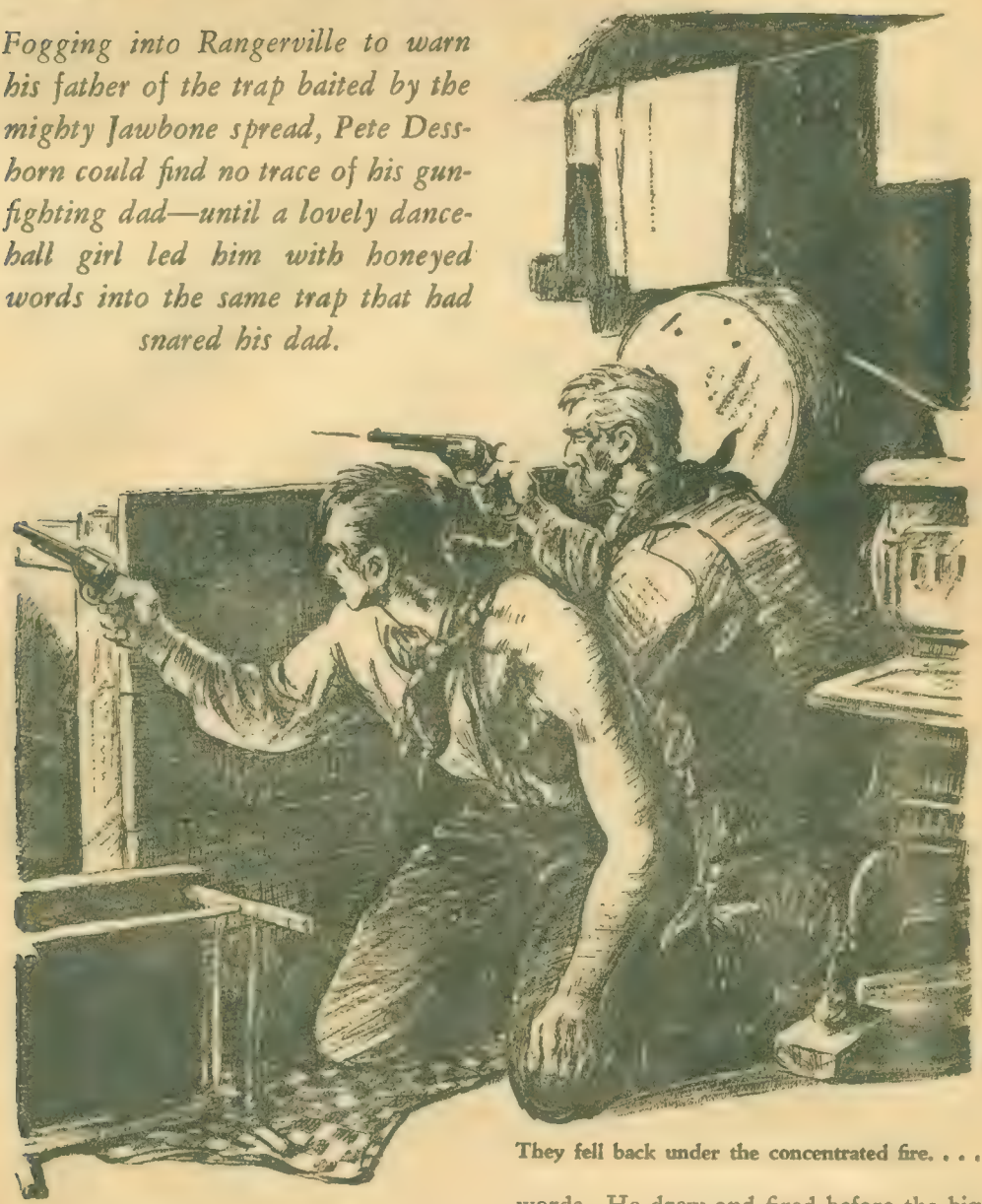
JOHN DESSHORN topped a rise and came upon three men butchering a steer. A lesser man might have turned and high-tailed it, considering the troubled state of the valley. John Desshorn stepped down from his big black and walked over to them, his jaw with its gray stubble set like iron.

The three straightened up, watching him narrowly. Desshorn recognized them as belonging to the tough Jawbone outfit that was bringing a reign of lawlessness to the valley. He toed the hide over and exposed his own Circle D brand.

"Looks like I got you with the goods," he said dispassionately. "Drop your belts and climb your horses!"

AN OLD GUN ★

Fogging into Rangerville to warn his father of the trap baited by the mighty Jawbone spread, Pete Desshorn could find no trace of his gun-fighting dad—until a lovely dance-hall girl led him with honeyed words into the same trap that had snared his dad.



They fell back under the concentrated fire. . . .

The cowpoke nearest him, a bulky, slouching hombre with partly dried blood on his hands, grinned widely. "Not this trip, mister," he mocked. His hand dropped toward his belt.

John Desshorn was not one to waste words. He drew and fired before the big fellow's hand touched gun butt. The second man's gun had just cleared leather when Desshorn shot him between the eyes. He swung his gun on the third man but that scared and shaken waddie wanted no part of it. His hands shot into the air while his startled and unbelieving eyes

moved from Desshorn to the two men on the ground.

Desshorn stepped forward and unbuckled the man's belt, letting it fall. "I reckon," he said quietly, "we won't have to go to town. Load them two on their horses and take 'em back to your boss."

He watched while the Jawbone man silently heaved the bodies across the saddles and lashed them there with slightly shaking hands.

The waddie swung to the saddle and looked down at the three guns on the ground. "How about them guns?" he asked.

"I'll keep 'em," Desshorn said flatly. "It might help you to keep in mind that it ain't healthy to eat Circle D meat."

Anger showed briefly in the man's eyes and was veiled. He picked up the reins and the horses moved off with their grisly burdens.

There was nothing in John Desshorn's manner to indicate that anything unusual had happened when he told his son about the shooting; he made it sound like a routine report.

Pete Desshorn listened and felt a little pulse hammer in his throat. He had a vast respect and admiration for this father of his who could so casually tell of winning an encounter that most men would have run from. But that was the way John Desshorn conducted his life. He had been sheriff in some of the toughest towns in the west and had dealt out an even, impersonal justice with his sixguns. His son had been a big factor in his decision to go ranching a few years back.

As Pete hefted the forfeited guns in broad, blunt-fingered hands there was a striking similarity between him and his father and yet a subtle difference. He was cast in the same square shouldered, compact mold but time, with its swift and insistent demands, had not yet set and hardened him as it had the older man.

Jawbone'll never take this lying down, he thought. To date, John Desshorn's reputation had kept them immune from the savage crowding of the big outfit and his son looked upon him as a tower of strength.

"This'll likely start things," he said and looked at his father.

John Desshorn's expression didn't change as he stated implacably, "They started it when they butchered my beef. I'll ride into town this afternoon and tell the sheriff how it happened, so's the slate will be clean."

Pete smiled down at the guns. The elder Desshorn's scrupulous exactness in reporting the double killing, at a time when killings were commonplace, amused him. Also the idea of reporting it to Sheriff Lacey of Rangerville. The whole valley knew that Lacey took his orders from Trumbull, owner of Jawbone.

Pete smiled but underneath ran a dark current of speculation. "You'd best be careful," he warned. "Trumbull and his tough Jawbone crew'll be out for your scalp."

John Desshorn stood up and, from long habit, his hand automatically adjusted the hang of the big Colt. "I'll be careful," he promised but his smile was grim. . . .

It wasn't until long past supper time that Pete really began to worry. John Desshorn had left for town shortly after noon and should have been back hours ago.

Pete trailed his spurs restlessly over the hard-packed dirt floor of the peeled log ranch house. Night was stealing out from the Lemhi range, spreading soft, sooty fingers across the valley to give a false impression of peace and quiet.

He had finished his solitary meal long ago. The Desshorn spread was not so big that two men couldn't work it satisfactorily.

Added to the worry was a feeling of loss. For the first time he became aware of his dependence upon the older man for leadership and advice. In a tight, John Desshorn could delve into his long experience with men and gunplay and, nine times out of ten, come up with the right answer.

Pete lacked that experience; he had never shot anything larger than a rattler or a stray coyote. But the restlessness continued to gnaw at him with razor sharp teeth and in the last dim light he went to the corral and saddled his gray gelding.

Under ordinary circumstances he would have figured that the old man could take care of himself, but now the Jawbone crew would be on the prod, ugly over the double killing. One man, no matter how good, couldn't stand them off single handed.

Pete grinned wryly at himself as he swung back on the cinch and then stepped into the saddle. Maybe he was just cooking things up inside his head and the old man would josh the life out of him for trying to play wet nurse.

The gray moved out into the darkness and rocked into a ground covering lope.

◇ ◇ ◇

RANGERVILLE lay in the heart of the valley, lush with the gold and the vices of trail crews and the stream of traffic brought in by the newly completed railroad. It was a hell-roaring, wide-open town and life was cheaper than the two-bit piece that would buy a drink of rot-gut across the bar of the dazzling Palace Saloon. Gunplay was frequent and usually fatal and boot hill harbored a large if quiet population.

Across the dusty, pock-marked road from the Palace was the office where ponderous, obese Sheriff Lacey squatted in his reinforced chair like some huge toad.

Pete added his gray to the string of cowponies at the Palace hitching rail and crossed to the office.

Yellow lamplight shone palely through a dirty chimney and the rawhide lacings of the chair creaked as Lacey looked up at Pete's entrance. His round gray eyes seemed threatening to pop from the folds of flesh which encased them and the light gave them a lusterless opacity.

Pete paused before the littered desk and asked. "Was John Desshorn in here?"

Lacey studied the levis-clad figure before him in silence as though giving the question time to penetrate his layers of fat. He shook his head. "Not today." His voice wheezed as though it took effort to force it through his larded throat.

Pete dragged out the makings and felt doubt assail him. A man didn't have to wait as long as Lacey had to answer a simple question.

At the back of the office, two cells were partitioned off and he moved over to them and looked in. One was empty and in the other a cowpoke was sleeping off a drunk.

Pete fashioned a cigarette and lighted it and turned back to surprise a sly grin creasing the sheriff's bulging cheeks.

"Satisfied?" Lacey grunted.

Pete nodded and went out. On the street he knew he had wasted his time. John Desshorn was likely bellied up to a bar washing the dust from his throat.

The street was a shifting checkerboard of light and shadow and the clatter of boots and spurs came from the walks.

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Pete pushed through the batwings of the Palace and was engulfed in light and sound. Five bartenders were busy at the long bar serving drinks to cowpokes and their partners fresh from the dance floor at the other end. At the back of the big room were the gambling rigs.

Pete trailed the length of the bar and saw no sign of John Desshorn. He edged into an empty spot and ordered a shot. As it came, the music started and the jam thinned out. He turned down an invitation to dance and stood nursing his drink, his eyes roving among the gambling layouts at the back.

A voice at his elbow startled him by its very nearness.

"Do you want to dance with me, cowboy?"

He turned his head and saw a blonde girl standing next to him. She was wearing an evening dress and her skin had a soft, creamy lustre. Pale yellow braids were wound around her head and her eyes were the deep blue of prairie flowers.

Pete eyed her and shook his head. "Thank you kindly, ma'm," he said, "but I reckon not now."

The girl smiled at him. "You might buy me a drink."

"Why sure," Pete answered and crooked a finger at the bartender.

But when the drink came she didn't seem to be interested. She toyed with it idly and leaned against the bar so that her head was close to him. Pete got a scent of perfume and, for some unaccountable reason, his pulses began to pound.

"Looking for some one?" she asked.

He nodded guardedly and moved a step away.

The girl frowned with annoyance. "Don't be so stiff," she admonished. "I might be able to help you."

Pete stared hard at her. "How?" he asked briefly.

She flushed at his tone and her blue eyes sparkled. "If you're looking for your father," she said in an angry yet guarded tone, "you might try Room Seven."

She turned abruptly leaving her drink untasted, her high heels clicking across the floor.

Pete watched her in the mirror with a feeling of chagrin. Maybe he had been too short with her; maybe she was really trying to help him.

He turned, on an impulse to follow, but she was already disappearing behind Orin Guildersleeve's office, apparently heading for the back stairs at the far end. He knew that upstairs were rooms for private games. The covered front stairway behind the bar led to them.

Pete idled at the bar. Why had she been so secretive about telling him that John Desshorn was upstairs? Orin Guildersleeve's Palace had a fairly good reputation considering the times. But then, why should the elder Deshorn, who never gambled, be upstairs?

At that moment the tall, frock-coated figure of Guildersleeve came from his office and drifted into the crowd around the gambling rigs. The Palace owner was a tall, striking looking man in his early thirties with black hair and eyes but there was a hint of weakness about his cleft chin. Just now he looked half angry, half worried as though something had rubbed him the wrong way.

Pete knew him indifferently well and had never felt much liking for him.

The thought of the girl returned to him again and he felt a challenge in the way she had left, almost as though she thought he lacked the nerve to go up.

He finished his drink and moved up the bar and around the end to the doorway that led to the stairs. They were steep and narrow and he went up softly. The noise and the lights had created a bright excitement in his head but had not entirely stifled his sense of caution.

A narrow hall, lighted dimly by a wall lamp, ran straight back with doors opening off on each side. Pete paused halfway down its length before number seven. The door was shut and he rapped his knuckles against it, the sound echoing hollowly.

Music and the noise from below filtered up to him but there was no sound from beyond the flimsy panels. He waited and tried the knob. The door swung inward and he stepped through the portal into a dimly lighted room.

A round deal table and four chairs took up the center of the room and at first glance he thought it empty. His eyes switched to the side and the breath stuck in his throat. John Desshorn lay sprawled on a couch along the wall.

Pete was beside him in two strides. The elder Desshorn was flat on his back, breathing heavily through open mouth.

Hurriedly, Pete ran his hands over him and could discover no injury. He paused suddenly and sniffed. A sharp, almost medicinal odor hung in the air above the unconscious man. A slight scraping noise caused him to jerk his head around without straightening up.

Framed in the doorway was a hard-faced hombre with an evil glint in his eyes and a sixgun hanging in his right hand. Even as Pete looked, the gun came up, pointing straight at him.

There wasn't time for him to draw. He saw death staring at him from the black muzzle and threw himself forward on the couch. The crash, as the man fired, filled the room deafeningly and lead zinged through the air inches above Pete. He hit the couch and his hand struck against the big Colt John Desshorn always wore.

In one movement he tugged the gun loose and bounced to the floor. The gunman was steadying for another shot. Pete rolled over and lead slammed splinters of flooring into his face. He brought up fac-

ing the man and the big gun rocked and roared in his fist.

The man went backwards, arms flung wide, as though some giant hand had struck him, and his yell rose high above the din below.

Pete got up swiftly and looked out into the hall. The waddie was lying on his side, one arm flung over his face and a pool of blood forming under his mouth.

The noise downstairs had ceased abruptly and feet were pounding towards the stairs.

Pete leaped back to the couch and heaved John Desshorn to his feet. But whatever had been given him was potent; he sagged like an empty feed sack.

Pete got him over his shoulder and started out. He stepped across the doorsill and heard men piling up the stairway and the bull voice of Trumbull urging them on.

He knew with a sickening sense of anger and futility that he was trapped. With Trumbull and his men blocking the front stairway he wheeled and started for the narrow back stairway at the end of the hall, knowing as he did so that a hail of lead would cut him down before he could reach it.

CHAPTER TWO

Night Flames

HE HADN'T taken more than two steps when a door at the other side of the hall swung open and the girl from downstairs clutched at his arm. Her face was white and her eyes were dark blue with fear.

"In here," she gasped, "quickly!"

Pete hesitated for the shred of a second —and stepped in. Even if this was another trap it could be no worse than the certain death that awaited him outside.

The girl closed the door and leaned against it as a rush of men gained the hall.

There was angry cursing as they discovered the man on the floor, then Pete could hear their footsteps fan out as they searched the room he had been in and others came on down the hall.

They passed the door where the girl leaned and went on down to the back stairway.

There was dim light in the room from the next building and Pete guessed this was the girl's bedroom. He laid John Desshorn on the bed and stepped over beside her, his father's big Colt still in his hand.

He stared at her shadowed face perplexedly. First she had steered him into a trap and now, apparently, she was trying to get him out of it.

She leaned close to him so that her lips brushed his cheek and again he caught that faint perfume. "Don't look," she whispered. "I'm going to change my clothes."

She left him then and Pete stared hard at the door while in back of him there began a faint rustling.

Outside men were ramming up and down the hall, slamming open doors and tramping through the rooms. Footsteps paused at the other side of the door and the knob rattled but the girl had shot the bolt.

"Open up!" a man's voice ordered curtly.

"What do you want?" It was the girl's voice and somehow she made it sound sleepy.

There was an instant's surprised silence and then the voice asked. "Who are you?"

"I'm Alice Guildersleeve, Orin's sister, and I'm in bed," she answered plaintively.

She moved up beside Pete and he gazed at her in surprise. He hadn't known that Orin Guildersleeve had a sister. She had donned a divided skirt and a blouse and was putting on a low-crowned, flat-brimmed hat.

There was a change in the man's voice on the other side of the door as he asked. "Yuh seen anything of two men up here?"

"How could I?" answered the girl. "I've been asleep."

The man guffawed loudly. "You musta been right tired to sleep through this racket."

They heard his footsteps moving off.

"There's a fire rope by the window," the girl whispered.

Pete nodded and went softly over to it. The window looked out on an alley as dark as the inside of a steer. He took the rope and looped it around John Desshorn, under the arms. He carried him to the window and eased him over the sill. When

he hung, a dead weight on the rope, Pete softly lowered him.

The rope was just long enough to reach the bottom and the top end was anchored in a stout iron ring. Pete went back to the girl. "Thanks, Miss," he said. "You've been a big help."

"I'm going with you."

"You can't do that," Pete protested hurriedly. "There's liable to be trouble and you might get hurt."

For answer the girl moved to the window, slid over the sill and, crooking her leg around the rope, went down like a veteran.

Pete grinned helplessly, shoved his father's Colt into his waistband and followed her. For a girl so pretty she certainly had a mind and a will of her own.

Before his head sank below window level he heard Trumbull storming up and down the hall, cursing his crew for not finding them. It wouldn't be long before they tumbled to the fact that there was only one place for them to go and then they would break into the room and discover the rope.

His feet touched ground and the girl was at his side. She had already released the rope from his father.

"Where to now?" she whispered.

Pete looked down at John Desshorn's lax form. "He can't ride," he answered, "so I reckon I'll have to get a buckboard. I'm headin' for the ranch."

"Where is your horse?" she asked.

"A gray, at the end of the rail," he told her.

"I'll meet you at the livery stable," she said and was gone before he could protest.

He got the elder Desshorn onto his shoulder and plodded down the dark alley. He didn't know what her game was but having gotten him out of one tight he didn't reckon she'd double cross him.

Pete came through the dark runway to the livery stable and saw Jennings, the proprietor, leaning back in a chair reading a newspaper by the light of a lantern set on an upended barrel.

He was a sallow, paunchy looking man with a drooping mustache and lank hair combed carefully over a bald spot. He looked up as Pete entered and his eyes narrowed at sight of the unconscious Desshorn.

"I want a buckboard and a fast team," Pete told him without preliminary.

In his job as liveryman in a cowtown, Jennings had seen many queer things. He merely nodded and set about harnessing a pair of bays. Pete eased John Desshorn down onto a pile of clean straw and helped with the harnessing. From up the street came a rising clamor of voices and Jennings paused to listen.

Pete led one of the bays out. "Let's go!" he said curtly and Jennings bridled its mate and followed.

He pulled out a buckboard from under the shed and started to hitch up when Trumbull's voice came to them clearly.

"Pete Desshorn just shot one of my men and is tryin' to make a getaway—"

Pete guessed he was yelling across the street to Sheriff Lacey.

Jennings hesitated. Jawbone was a tough outfit to buck and besides, he got a lot of business from them. "Wait a minute," he said and walked back to the stable.

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ACTING on a hunch, Pete followed him soundlessly. He saw him go into the first stall and take a hog-leg from a holster nailed to the wall. As the man turned to come out, Pete didn't hesitate. He had probably killed one man tonight and it didn't bother him the way he had thought it would. He laid the barrel of the big Colt over Jenning's bald spot and the liveryman crumpled in the bottom of the stall.

Pete left him there and carried John Desshorn out to the buckboard. He put him in and finished hitching the bays. He had snapped the last trace when Alice Guildersleeve rode the gray up beside him stepped down. She tied the gray to the tailboard and climbed over the wheel to the buckboard's seat.

"You'd best hurry," she told him calmly. "Trumbull says you killed one of his hands and the sheriff has just sworn him and his crew in as deputies. They're scouring town for you."

Pete stepped up to the seat beside her and picked up the reins. "You're likely lettin' yourself in for trouble," he warned as he swung the team around.

They made it out of town without being sighted by the Jawbone crew and Pete swung the team back to the road. Alice Guildersleeve sat quietly on the seat and despite the strangeness of the situation he had an unexplainable feeling that it was quite natural for her to be there beside him. He didn't think she was more than nineteen or twenty which would make her about a year or so younger than himself.

Just now, his paramount idea was to get his father to a place of safety and that meant the ranch, but running beside it in his mind were speculations about the girl. She didn't look or act like a dancehall girl. Even when she had appeared in the barroom in evening dress there had been a clean freshness about her that didn't go with the tarnished, smoke laden atmosphere of the dancehall and the bold-eyed girls who inhabited it.

Too, it seemed queer that Orin Guildersleeve should want his sister in the dancehall.

He had warned the girl to expect trouble but in his heart he didn't think there was much chance of it. Even if Jawbone came after them it wasn't likely they would show up before morning.

Pete grinned in the darkness. By then John Desshorn would be himself again and would know how to handle them. The old man had never yet been up against a situation he couldn't take care of.

At the thought, Pete experienced a warm feeling of release. He guessed he had done pretty fair tonight but it took the old man to handle a tough crew like Jawbone.

The bays were covering ground steadily and Pete felt good. He said to the girl. "You must be new around here—I haven't seen you before."

Her voice answered clearly in the starlit night. "I came out last week to live with Orin—after my mother died."

"I'm right sorry to hear that," Pete murmured. "I mean that your mother died," he added hastily.

"Maybe you should be sorry I came," the girl said. "I steered you into a trap."

"And got me out again," Pete said, "so that squares things."

"I don't know my brother very well," she said thoughtfully. "He's much older than I am and has always been away from home. . . . He seems to be afraid of Trumbull. He does everything Trumbull tells him to do. I didn't know what they were planning until I went back to the office and heard them talking. I saw you were still at the bar and I wanted to warn you but Orin came out then and I went upstairs. I intended to tell you but you came up so softly I didn't hear you . . . then it was too late."

"So that's how it was," Pete said. "I wondered." He was silent for a while. "I can't figure why they played it that way," he mused aloud. "Why didn't they get me out in the street?"

"I think the main idea was to get your father," the girl answered. "Trumbull is afraid to tackle him in a fair fight. You know he killed two of Trumbull's men."

"I know," Pete said. "Even a slick gunhand like Trumbull wouldn't want to take on the old man."

"Trumbull," she continued, "will never rest until he has evened that score. I think the plan was to kill you and your father upstairs and then claim that you killed each other over an argument about cards."

"Pretty thin," Pete observed. "Everybody knows the old man doesn't gamble."

"That's true," she agreed. "They knew there would be some talk but Sheriff Lacey was in on it with them and they figured nothing much would be done. If they had simply killed your father while he was drugged they knew that even Rangerville wouldn't stand for that. There is a decent element in town. I know that Trumbull is afraid they will get together one of these days and run the tough crews out of the valley."

"There's been some talk of it," Pete admitted, "but they can't seem to get organized. Every man's out for himself—" He broke off suddenly in his talk and reined the bays back on their haunches.

Far off over the level range a column of flame was mounting against the night sky!

The girl sucked in her breath sharply and they watched as the flames spread and rose higher into the blackness.

A heavy, dismayed anger filled Pete as he realized it was his ranch that was burning—anger, and a sudden sharp realization that jolted him out of his feeling of security. Jawbone hadn't waited for morning!

CHAPTER THREE

"An Eye for an Eye"

FOR black, bitter moments Pete and the girl watched the lurid flames. His plan to hole up in the ranch until John Desshorn could take over had been ruined with utter finality and the responsibility for his father's safety and of himself had been tossed back squarely into his lap. Along with that knowledge came a sharp awareness of immediate danger.

"Aren't you going to try to save some of the buildings?" the girl asked.

Pete shook his head and drove the team off the road.

"You'd better take the gray and head back to town," he said curtly.

"Why?" she asked. "Don't you want me with you?"

He could sense surprise and a hint of alarm in her tones. Pete's hand closed over her's as it lay on the seat between them and he was surprised at the force of his emotion.

"It's not that," he disclaimed quickly, "but you can't go where I'm headin'."

"Where are you going?" There was no mistaking the alarm in her voice now.

Pete's voice was grim. "I'm headin' for the Jawbone spread."

"You can't!" she gasped. "They'll kill you!"

"Maybe not," he said quietly. "More'n likely they're back at town lookin' for me. When they get back to their spread they'll have somethin' else to think about."

"But why don't you go on to your own ranch?" the girl persisted.

"Because," said Pete, "I reckon some of the outfit is layin' out around that fire waitin' for me to drive in."

The girl was silent as though thinking it over. Presently she stood up. "Very well," she said quietly. "I'll go back to town, but I won't stay at my brother's after what he has done."

She jumped to the ground and went back to the gray. Pete climbed down, feeling a little surprised, and went around with her. He had expected her to protest. "Stay with Hank Delaney," he told her. "Hank's the big red-headed Irishman who runs the general store. He's square as a die and he and his wife will be glad to take you in."

Alice Guildersleeve nodded and stepped into the saddle.

"Stay off the road," he said. "You might meet Jawbone on their way out here."

"I'll be careful," she promised. "Take care of yourself." The gray carried her off into the night.

Before he mounted to the seat he struck a match and looked at John Desshorn but the older man was still deep in a drugged stupor.

When the bays had struck their tireless, mile-eating pace, Pete sat slackly in the seat, giving to the roll and bounce of the buckboard. Freed of responsibility for the girl he was able to put his mind on what lay ahead.

The diminishing glow behind him seemed to burn through his brain and kindle a bright, hot anger. That, and the thought of how they had planned to kill John Desshorn while he lay drugged and helpless.

He thought, *They burned the ranch so nobody would try to settle there. Trumbull will add the range to his own holdings.*

The plan had been to get both Desshorns in town but Pete knew that Trumbull was the kind of man who would copper his bets and the men who fired the house would be still there, waiting.

Pete had made his decision to head for Jawbone in a sudden, wild gust of anger and now that he had time to think it over it wasn't as foolhardy as the girl had seemed to think. With the ranch-house burned and Rangerville, swarming with Jawbone men, barred to him, there was no other place to go. If he stayed on the open range, come morning they would track him down.

An old owlhoot rider had once told him, "If yo're on the dodge, hit fer a place that's so close they'll never think of lookin' fer yuh there—git under the sheriff's bed if yuh kin."

Pete grinned wickedly. He couldn't get much closer unless he got into Trumbull's room and he had other plans for that. Jawbone had dealt the cards but, if he had any luck, they wouldn't take all the tricks.

A new feeling of responsibility put

creases between Pete's black brows. Instead of being able to look to John Desshorn for leadership the tables were turned and now he was the one who had to do the thinking and planning for their joint safety; the blame, if failure came, would rest squarely on him.

He had never heard that "The best defense is offense" but it had always been John Desshorn's policy to meet danger more than halfway and Pete was doing his best to emulate him.

A three-quarter moon was turning the range to silver when he tooled the team in a big half-circle and came in on the other side of the Jawbone home ranch.

A gigantic haystack, left by some former owner, reared itself like a monstrous mushroom. Cattle had eaten out a gallery entirely around it so now the top part overhung by four or five feet.

Pete carried the elder Desshorn to the back of the over hang and pulled loose hay over him. He went back to the team and headed them for town with a slap on the rump. The chances were they would keep on traveling until they reached the livery stable runway.

The ranch-house and out buildings were alternate patches of silver and black shadow as he started for them. There was no sign of a light and he figured they were all in town except the horse wrangler, who was probably too far out to cause any trouble.

Even so, he breathed easier when he had gained the dense shadow along the bunkhouse. He stuck his head in at a window and listened for long minutes. Satisfied that the building was empty, he went on across the hard-packed, moonlighted earth to the house.

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ON THE right, stacked cordwood threw a patch of darkness at his feet and beyond, the weathered, unpainted house boards were faintly silver gray, changing abruptly to black where the lean-to kitchen roof sloped off to the left.

Pete opened the door of the lean-to and went quietly in. Trumbull had no family and the house would be deserted. He opened a window on the far side and struck a match. The cook's can of coal oil was in a corner and he picked it up and sloshed it around, covering floor and walls.

At the door he struck a match and tossed it back into the room. It sputtered for an instant and took hold. The draft from the open door sucked across to the window and flame spread out following the oil pattern as though some swift magic were drawing it on.

He waited until the room was roaring like a furnace and started back. "An eye for an eye", he quoted to himself and an angry bee snapped dust from his hat brim.

For one startled instant he stopped and stood motionless, the crack of the rifle sharp in his ears. Then he bent low and ran for the stacked cordwood. Dust and gravel spurted between his feet as the rifle cracked again and he threw himself forward in a belly-scraping slide that brought him behind shelter. The wrangler hadn't been so far out.

He had seen the last rifle flash out on the open plain beyond the buildings and knew that he was out ranged; the Colt could not carry that far.

Behind him flames burst through the roof of the lean-to and licked hungrily up the side of the house, their fierce, ruddy light dispelling the shadows.

He crawled to the opposite end of the pile and peered out. Lead threw splinters in his face and a stick of wood jumped from the pile. Pete drew back. That shot had been closer, the rifleman was moving in but he was still beyond the range of the Colt.

Flames were licking all over the outside of the house by now and through the windows he could see a dull, red glow. A solid wall of heat was pressing out at him, drying the sweat on his body.

The red flicker of flames was reflected in the bunkhouse windows and the whole yard was bright as day. Pete knew he was in a tight spot. The wrangler could keep to the shadows and work around until he got him in line. Also, the heat was growing steadily worse.

He thought of making a quick run for the bunkhouse and decided against it. The chances were that he would be picked off before he had covered half the distance. He had to trick the wrangler into showing himself within pistol range.

Pete took off his boots and shoved a heavy stick of cordwood into each. He placed his hat on another stick and raised it above the pile near the far end. He moved it slowly along until the rifle cracked. The hat jumped and the impact of lead against the cordwood stick numbed his arm. Pete dropped it and flopped the boots out past the barrier, toes slanting at opposite horizons. Then he lay flat on his belly, the big Colt gripped in readiness in his fist.

The rifle slammed out another shot above the roar of the fire and a boot jumped. Pete swore softly; they were good boots and the slug had cut through cleanly just above the instep.

The wrangler would approach from the end away from the fire and Pete hoped fervently that he would be within pistol range when he appeared—that he wouldn't skulk far out in the darkness trying for a distant view.

The rifle remained silent and Pete's nerves tightened. He would have to depend on sight alone for the roar and hiss of flames would drown out footsteps.

He waited while the fire at his back got hotter and his bootless feet squirmed in the heat. Sweat was running down his face and forehead, sliding into his eyes with its salty sting.

He dragged an arm across his eyes and lay quiet, staring at the outer edge of light; the wrangler would have had time to get here by now.

The stacked wood jarred and shook as something landed on it. Pete jerked his head around and up and he and the wrangler saw each other at the same instant. The man was poised atop the pile, the rifle in his hands raised head high to regain his balance after the leap that had carried him up there.

He glimpsed Pete and brought the rifle down in a quick, short arc.

Pete was flat on his belly, braced on the elbow of his gun hand and he had to shift his weight and bring the Colt around across his chest to fire.

The wrangler got into position and fired first but he was hurried. The bullet exploded the ground under Pete's chin and powder grains stung his cheek. He steadied the Colt and pulled the trigger as the wrangler was pulling back the rifle bolt. The heavy slug took the man full in the chest. He swayed atop the pile, the rifle slipping from his hands. Then he pitched forward and came down on top of Pete with a small avalanche of wood.

Pete got loose and turned the wrangler over onto his back. The the man was stone dead. The big Colt had drilled a slug straight through his heart.

Pete carried him down to the bunkhouse and laid him on a bunk. As he picked up rifle and shells and started for the haystack, he suddenly felt utterly weary. His feet dragged and leaden weights seemed to hang on each eyelid.

John Desshorn still slept. Pete reckoned if the old man came out of it by morning they could spend the day under the stack and at night get a couple of horses and high-tail it. Anyway, John Desshorn would know what to do.

He crawled under the overhang a few feet beyond his father and was asleep almost before he had finished pulling hay over himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thunder at the Jawbone

PETE DESSHORN slept as though dead. The pulsing life of a new day had cast a warm flush over the sky's gray cheek when he stirred and sat up. Something had been subtly hammering at the door of consciousness.

He brushed away the hay and looked out under the overhang. He saw the bunkhouse and beyond, the smoking ruins of the house with a group of angry, grim-faced men gathered near it. The big, square shouldered figure of Trumbull was striding up and down, his hard hands balled into fists. Even at this distance Pete could hear the strident anger in his voice.

Pete looked at the spot past his feet where he had laid John Desshorn and his stomach contracted as though a blow had landed in it. The spot was empty!

He stared at the empty depression in the hay for a moment of dire consternation and dove forward to look around the bulge of the stack.

Directly before him was the small cook shack with the pump at one side. John Desshorn was already halfway to it. Pete

could tell by the way he walked that he was still under the drug's influence.

Weaving on his feet, he was walking in full view of the Jawbone crew and—he didn't have a gun. The big Colt was still stuck into Pete's waistband.

John Desshorn must have waked up with a raging thirst and, half drugged, headed straight for the pump.

Pete cursed himself in one savage burst and was out, running after that stumbling figure.

He reached the elder Desshorn as the Jawbone crew saw them—and they still had a good hundred feet to go!

Pete slung an arm around him and John Desshorn looked at him dully, uncomprehendingly.

"Run!" Pete yelled and urged him on as a racket of gunfire broke out. He swerved off at a tangent to get the cook shack between them and the crew.

Bullets snapped past, singing their deadly warning and he pulled out the Colt and sent lead flying back.

The hard-case crew headed for them, running raggedly, which was good in a way for it spoiled their aim. Trumbull ran with them, his heavy legs pushing solidly so that dirt spurted at each stride. Each time he fired he brought the gun down as though hammering with it.

It seemed like hours to Pete before they gained the shelter of the cook shack but they were still fifty feet from it. John Desshorn's feet were misbehaving.

In desperation, Pete shoved the Colt back in his waistband and picked him up in his arms. John Desshorn weighed a good one seventy and Pete lurched forward with straining muscles and pumping lungs.

The door of the shack was at the opposite end but there was an open window facing him—and the shack was empty. He gave a heave and got the older man's legs over the sill and shoved him through.

Pete was astraddle the sill when the door slammed open. A Jawbone man, running full tilt, came through.

Pete brought his gun up and shot before the man could check his headlong flight. The waddie went down, pushing his face along the floor and Pete swung his leg over and leaped for the door.

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Other men were rushing it, and he emptied the gun in their faces. As he slammed the door shut he caught a glimpse of something that burned itself into his brain like a branding iron—Alice Guildersleeve stood before the bunkhouse, hands clasped at her back, watching. With the bar in place he stepped aside to reload. There was another window at the side and a big wood range was backed against the blind wall.

John Desshorn lay in a heap where he had fallen and Pete dragged him over and left him in front of the range.

Bullets thudded against the door and he heard men move about the shack. He took up his stand midway between the two windows.

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A SHADOW moved out past the side window and the man came into view. Pete blasted a shot at him and he went out of sight with a roar of pain. That shot might have been the signal for they opened up on all sides.

They were still using sixguns, he could tell by the sound, and the walls were stout enough to stop their lead but he doubted if they would hold against rifle fire.

Almost as an echo of his thoughts a rifle cracked sharply and a slug tore through the shack from end to end. Pete grabbed a table and turned it on its side in front of the stove and crouched behind it. At best it was flimsy protection.

John Desshorn stirred and mumbled "Water—"

Pete reached a half full pail with a dipper and hauled it inside. The older man sat up and drank as though his legs were hollow. But after he had finished he just sat there taking no interest in what was happening or his strange surroundings.

Splinters flew from the walls as more rifles went into action. Lead pinged against the cook stove and ricochetted with a vicious whine.

Pete pushed his father down on the floor and lay flat, with an eye cocked on the windows. He held his fire and waited in grim silence while unseen marksmen riddled the shack. How long it would be

before a bullet with his name on it came along, he wondered.

The firing ceased abruptly and silence flowed in. Even as he waited for what would happen next, part of his mind was busy with the girl—he couldn't seem to stop thinking about her.

His ears were still ringing from the gunfire when a head appeared at the end window.

Pete raised himself and fired and the man dropped soundlessly. At that instant a gun roared from the side window. Pete was slammed back against the stove while hot agony smashed through him. In that shocked instant of pain he knew that the end was not far off. Seemingly of its own volition the Colt came up and exploded and the window was suddenly empty. Pete didn't reckon he'd gotten that one.

His left arm hung uselessly and cold sweat bathed him as torture from shattered nerves crawled through his body, picking at his brain with red hot needles.

He ripped the shirt from his shoulder and exposed the raw, black hole. The sight of the blood dripping down Pete's chest seemed to arouse John Desshorn from his lethargy.

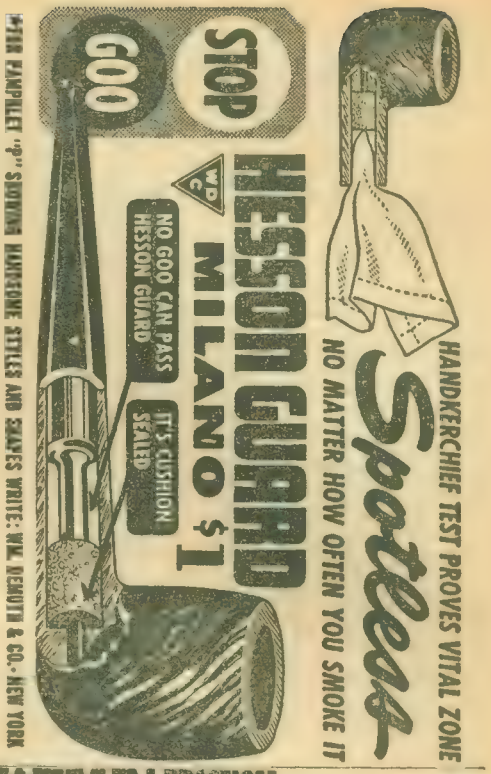
The men outside had resumed their rifle practice and while the shack echoed and shook to the slam of lead he fashioned a wad for his son's wound with slow fingers and tied it in place with the torn shirt sleeve.

Bullets ceased to come through the shack from the ends but the firing on the sides was intensified. There was a sudden scuffle of feet and the door splintered and shook with a mighty crash.

Pete cursed silently in his pain. They were battering the door while the fire from the two sides protected them, and there was no window at that end. All he could do was wait until the door went down—and it wouldn't stand much of that treatment.

At the next blow it came clear of the hinges and hung precariously, held only by the bar. There was a moment's silence, then a rush of feet. The bar gave way and the door skittered half way across the room.

Pete fired swiftly into the mass of men boiling into the room—and another gun



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roared beside him. John Desshorn had at last gotten into the fight, using the gun of the puncher Pete had killed!

Under that concentrated fire they fell back. Two men went down and were dragged from sight. Pete shot a glance at his father. The older man's face was a greenish gray and he swayed a little on his knees but his big Colt didn't waver.

Outside, Trumbull was raging and cursing, trying to get the crew to storm the door.

John Desshorn went calmly about reloading with never a question, as though the events of the past night were perfectly intelligible to him instead of a blank.

Pete leaned back against the stove to ease the fire in his shoulder and wheels rattled outside the shack.

Trumbull ceased shouting and for a little there was quiet. Then a wheezy voice that Pete recognized as Sheriff Lacey's called, "You hear me, Desshorn? This is Sheriff Lacey. You've been resistin' my deputies and I've got warrants for you on murder charges. Come out and surrender—and I'll see that you and Pete stand a fair trial."

Pete knew his father's notions of law and order and his respect for lawmen and a quick worry assailed him. "Don't do it!" he said hastily. "Lacey was in on the game to get you drugged and killed. You go out now and you'll never reach town!"

John Desshorn nodded but what he was going to say was checked by Lacey's voice.

"If you ain't out of that shack in two minutes, Desshorn, we'll burn it!"

John Desshorn raised a voice that was a little thick but its import carried to those outside. "You're wastin' time, Lacey!" he called.

Trumbull cursed anew and wheels rattled as the wagon drew off. Firing broke out again. Pete settled back with a sense of futility. Eventually they would be forced out to face rifle fire without a chance of fighting back. Without the bullet hole in his shoulder he might have tried to make a run for it—now it was hopeless, and he knew John Desshorn wouldn't leave him.

Pete turned his head. "I was a fool to get you into this," he said.

"I don't know what led up to it," said John Desshorn gently, "but I reckon you done the best you could. Every road's got to have an ending."

His words were drowned out by gunfire that seemed to go suddenly haywire. Guns crashed from every direction but, strangely, no bullets hit the shack.

The two men looked at each other in startled uncomprehension. Then John Desshorn got himself to a window. He gave a low exclamation and something in his tone impelled Pete to drag himself to his feet and join him.

◇ ◇ ◇

OUTSIDE, a long line of mounted men were racing across the open flat, guns smoking. Outnumbered three to one, the Jawbone was already on the run.

With unbelieving eyes Pete recognized big, red-headed Hank Delaney riding on the near end of the line. Next to him was Jim Morrisby, a neighbor, and past him were townsmen. Orin Guildersleeve flashed past on a big gray and his faro dealer was riding next to him. Pete realized with a gulp that at last the long-hoped-for had happened; the honest men of Rangerville had gotten together! Judging from the presence of Morrisby, they had also picked up some of the local ranchers—and some townsmen who were not so honest. He couldn't understand Guildersleeve's presence.

They came on fast and their shooting was deadly. Tough Jawbone was taking a licking and a bad one. What was left of the crew was headed for the bunkhouse and when they saw they couldn't make it they turned around and threw down their guns. All but Trumbull. He threw down his empty rifle and disappeared around the bunkhouse.

John Desshorn sized up the situation and ran for the door. He got out of the shack and kept going for the bunkhouse, still a little unsteady on his feet.

Pete watched him with a quick apprehension. He knew what was in the older man's mind. The other side of the bunkhouse was a blind wall. Trumbull would have to come around to the front to get in

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and John Desshorn was going to be there waiting.

Pete clapped a hand to his shoulder and went painfully to the door.

The men from town had pulled up and now they shouted to him, but the elder Desshorn paid no attention. He kept on going, unsteadily. When he was a good rod from the bunkhouse, Trumbull came pounding around the corner, his heavy face drawn and desperate.

He saw Desshorn and ploughed to a stop. The man he had feared to meet and had done his best to murder stood in front of him but now he was sick and swaying on his feet.

There was vicious triumph in Trumbull's face as his hand went for his gun.

Men who witnessed that meeting and who had seen John Desshorn in action, said afterwards that he had never moved so fast. They swore that they never saw his hand move and yet—the big Colt was in it and belching flame and lead at Trumbull before his gun cleared leather. Trumbull died on his feet, his life blasted out by .44 slugs before he reached the ground.

A buckboard drawn by two bays cut out from behind the haystack and raced in the direction of town, a big, toad-like man urging them on with whip and tongue.

Pete recognized Lacey and started to run in a futile effort to head him off. But someone else had also seen him. Orin Guildersleeve swung his big gray around and was after him like a shot. Pete staggered to a stop while things seemed to float around him. In a daze he saw Guildersleeve pull even with the buckboard, saw the flash of guns as both men fired.

Guildersleeve went sideways off his horse to hit and roll. The bay team kept on going but Sheriff Lacey was crumpled over the dashboard.

Pete's legs buckled under him and the last thing he saw was that huge, bloated figure swaying inertly with each jump of the horses. . . .

Talk, and the sound of men milling about rolled over Pete in waves. He opened his eyes and discovered that he was on a bed in the bunkhouse and that he was half supported by Alice Guildersleeve's slim arms and that his head was pillowed on her breast.

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Hank Delaney's voice, talking to John Desshorn, came to him clearly. "That girl came into my place like a whirlwind. Me and some of the boys was havin' a little gab fest and when she got through tellin' us about Trumbull and what she thought of us we felt like crawlin' in a hole and pullin' it in after us. Then she went over to the Palace to get some clothes.

"A little later Orin Guildersleeve came in lookin' pretty white around the gills. He said that Trumbull had pulled a gun on him and taken Alice along with him to make sure that Orin kept his mouth shut.

"Orin owned up that he was wanted back in another state for murder—said that he'd come here and tried to straighten up but that Trumbull had forced him to play it crooked by holdin' a club over his head. When he finished tellin' what had been goin' on we didn't have no trouble formin' an unofficial posse."

Pete felt a warm glow inside him. He opened his eyes and saw the red marks of a rope on the girl's wrist. He put his hand over it gently and Alice Guildersleeve smiled down at him.

John Desshorn came over to the bunk and looked down at them. "The boys want me to take over the job of sheriff and sort of clean up the valley," he explained. "After we get a new house run up for you youngsters I reckon I'll do it—if you reckon you can get along for a while without me."

Pete grinned up at his father with a new found sense of confidence. "Take your time," he drawled. "I reckon Alice and me can hold the place together 'till you get back."

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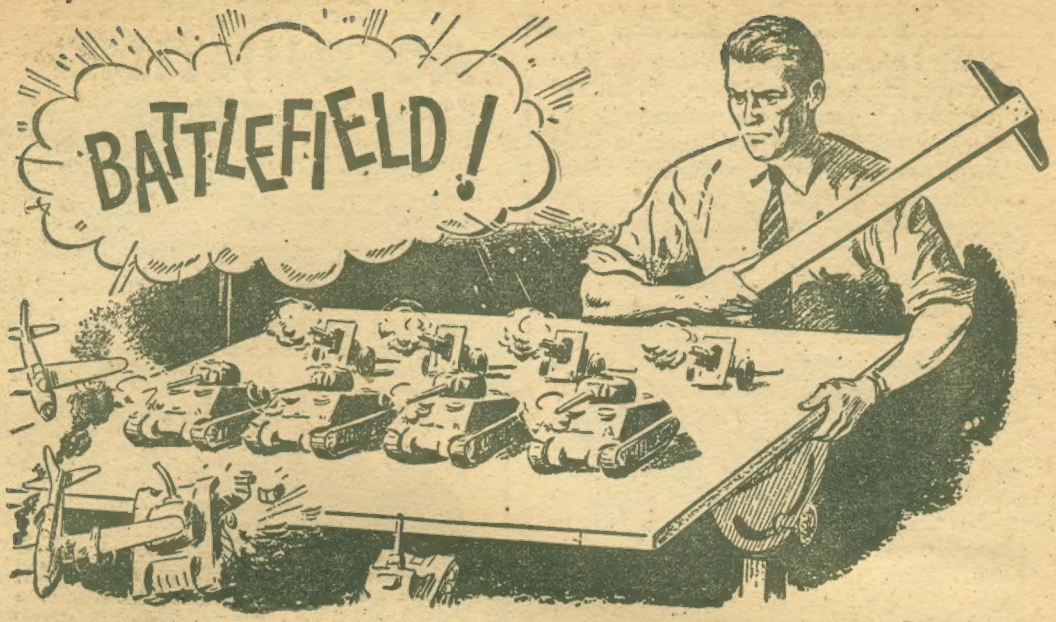

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I'll give you my latest streamlined Power-Plus Course that is BETTER than my Hollywood Course for which thousands of others paid me $25.00. I'll give you every fundamental Power-Plus principle — VIBRO-PRESSURE. TONIC RELAXATION PSYCHO-POWER, RHYTHMIC PROGRESSION. I'll give you the original Photo-Instruction Charts—THIRTY-NINE of them, each almost a foot wide and a foot and a half long! I'll give you the original BINDER-EASEL, with complete instructions on every detail of your routine. I give you my original TRAINING TABLE TALKS with full advice on the muscular system, food, bathing, and other vital subjects. I'll send you all the essence of what I have learned in physical culture for 20 years!

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Save postage by enclosing $2.95 in full. Same money-back guarantee applies.

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"Don't be asleep to danger!"—says HI to HATT

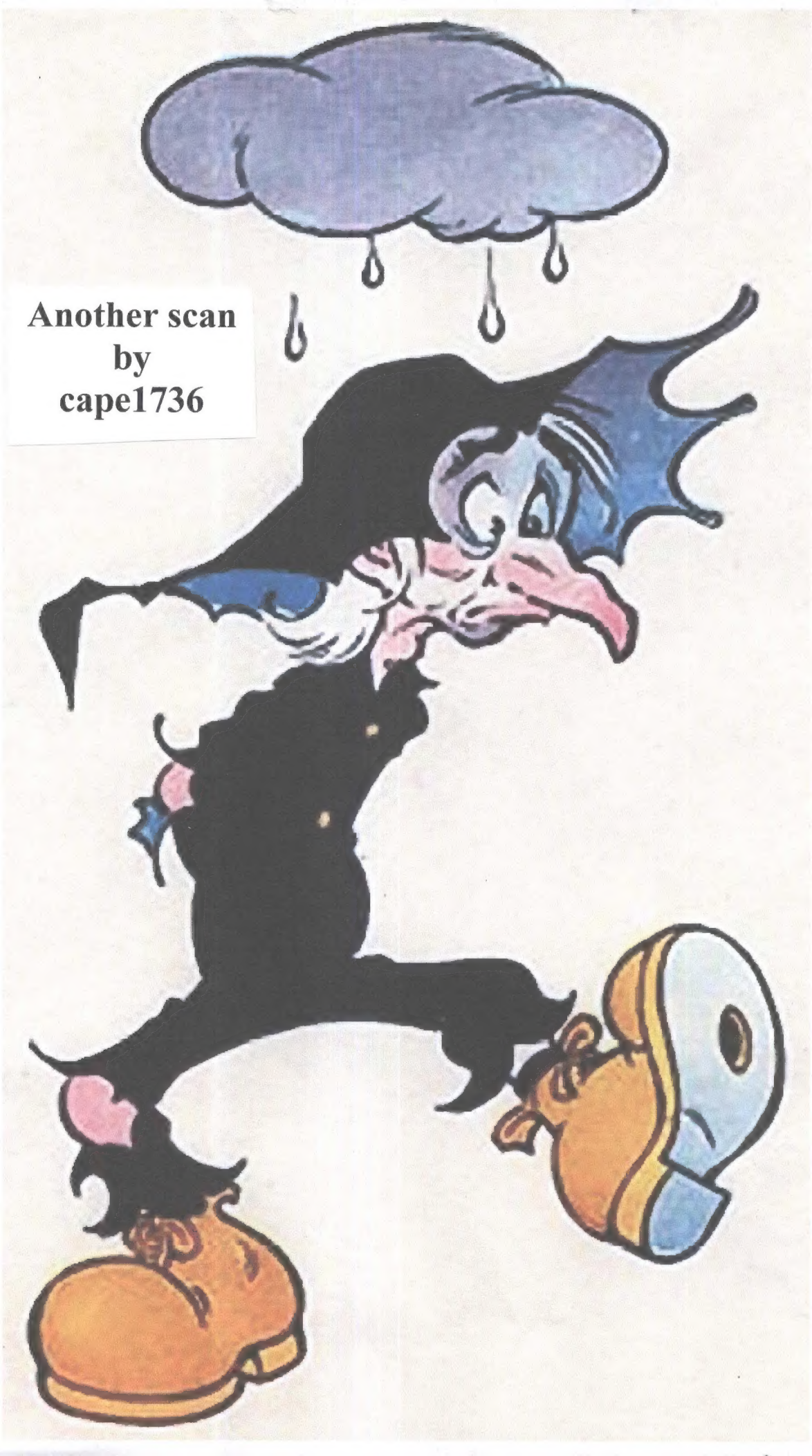
WAR AIN'T A DREAM!

This ain't no time for forty winks
an' talkin' in your slumber,
'Cause one of Hitler's prowlin' ginks
could easy get your number!
A patriot what's worth the name
will safeguard this here nation
By puttin' in a lot of work
an' cuttin' conversation!

(Signed) **MR. HI AND MR. HATT**

KESSLER'S BLENDED WHISKEY

KESSLER'S PRIVATE BLEND. 55% Grain Neutral Spirits 85 Proof Julius Kessler Distilling Co., Incorporated, Lawrenceburg, Ind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